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05 >
0 71486 03836 8

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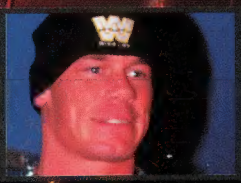

First Look ///

Death Jr.

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We found Malice! • Sony sequel madness: Jak, Rachet and Sly return • Nintendo E3 first look

INSIDE

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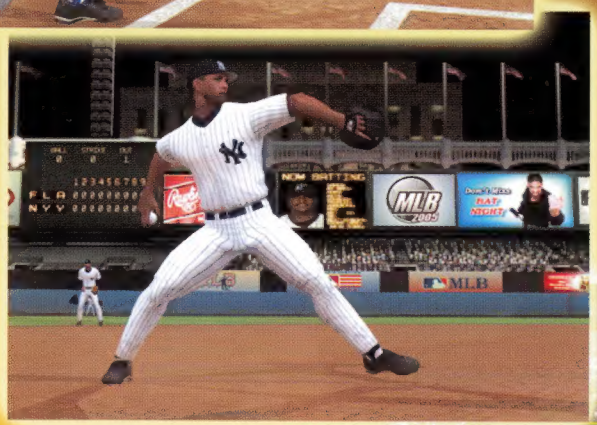

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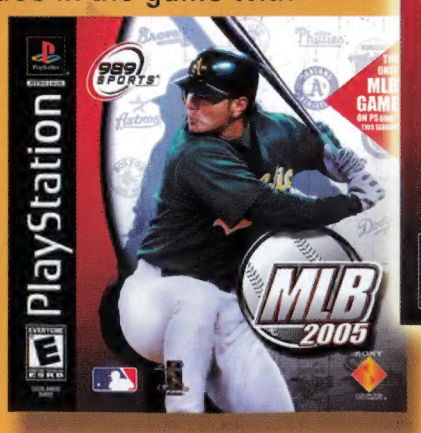

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Issue 29
Volume 3 Issue 5
May 2004

The Real Thing?

In the wake of games like Van Helsing, Alias, James Bond: Everything or Nothing, Harry Potter, Bad Boys and so on, as we stare headlong into the impending movie-game abyss, I'm finding myself increasingly disenchanted with controlling virtual actors. Some more than others, but in general I'd much rather that movie-related games were based on making the best game possible for each brand, rather than attempting to fit the film into a game. Just as certain liberties must be taken adapting a comic book into a film, so should certain liberties apply going from the movie to a game. Take Van Helsing, for example. For the film, they need an actor—for financing, box office draw and especially to sell the part—but none of these qualities are necessary to make a good game. What a game needs is exaggeration. Games don't need to employ special effects like a film; they *are* special effects. So why play it real? Wouldn't the Van Helsing video game be much cooler with a more fantasy-based monster hunter, like Dante or Alucard? While controlling Hugh Jackman, I get the same feeling I did carrying my Batman lunch pail to school as a kid. But I'm all grown up now. Just as I'd never wear a Hugh Jackman T-shirt, controlling a real person in a game feels like the adult version of the cooties. I'll admit that playing around with Jennifer Garner was eminently cooler than controlling Mr. Jackman (just as the reverse would apply for a female gamer), but positioning her in compromising positions felt strangely invasive. Running up and down the same stairs in Angel of Darkness to spot the jiggle is one thing; checking under the hood of a real person is quite another. Or is it?

Am I totally off base in my assumption that gamers prefer fantasy characters over real ones? Does anyone actually buy a game because it features a celebrity? I'm not talking sports; sports are all about realism, so that's a different story (plus we all live vicariously through our sports heroes). I'm talking actors, people with kids, real lives, that kind of thing. Part of the problem may also be the fact that the closer 3D models get to the real thing, the more dead they look. After knowing what the person is supposed to look and act like, video game versions seem especially contorted and deformed. Any developer will tell you the hardest thing to make seem real is reality...so then why do publishers insist that they try? I'll tell you why...money. The people holding the cash always win. If a studio head knows the only way he's getting the contract is by keeping his mouth shut and making virtual Hugh, then that's what he's going to do. The only people who can really affect change are the consumers, so if you feel the same way, write me, or write or email the publishers; they have people they pay to listen to you. They must love me.

"Wouldn't the Van Helsing video game be much cooler with a more fantasy-based monster hunter, like Dante or Alucard?"

Dave Halverson Editor-in-chief
dhalverson@playmagazine.com

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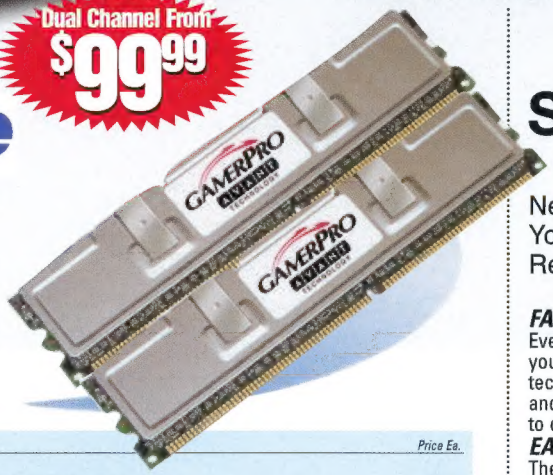

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contents 020

010 **playback**

The holiday gaming glut, RPG arguments, poetry for ninjas

012 **ink**

Check out the inside scoop on Death Jr., the first game revealed for Sony's PSP

020 **cover story**

Neo Contra

Lock, load and jump into battle once again for this exclusive hands-on preview of the latest installment of Konami's beloved shooter series! Contra finally gets a proper 3D makeover.

026 **previews**

Bloodrayne 2 026, Resident Evil 4 027, Van Helsing 028, Killer 7 029, Shrek 2 030, Way of the Samurai 2 031, Sly 2 032, Jak 3 034, Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal 036, Advent Rising 038, Nintendo E3 Preview 040

042 **preview gallery**

Highlights include Ace Combat 5, Unreal Championship 2, Darkwatch, Astro Boy and Star Wars: Battlefront

044 **reviews**

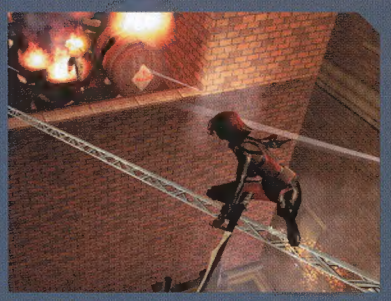
Malice 044, Final Fantasy XI Online 046, Siren 048, Resident Evil: Outbreak 050, Syphon Filter: The Omega Strain 051, Alias 052, Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow 053, Tenchi: Return to Darkness 054

055 **review gallery**

Including Wario Ware, Serious Sam: Next Encounter, TOCA Race Driver 2, Carve and Samurai Warriors

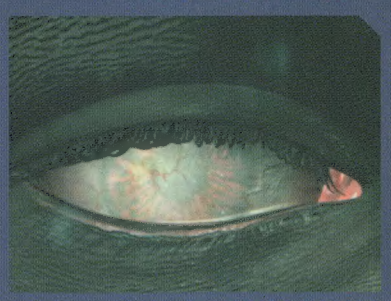
057 **play pc**

Soldiers: Heroes of World War II previewed, Far Cry reviewed and behind the scenes of Painkiller



026 Bloodrayne 2

036 Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal



050 Resident Evil: Outbreak

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contents 082

063 **rewind**

Go back in time with Strider for Mega Drive and TMNT IV on SNES. Cowabunga, dude!

064 **play mobile**

Crash and Spyro team up, while Mario and Donkey Kong renew their rivalry

066 **play sports**

In the ring and outside the ropes with the WWE; go for the bling bling with Midway's NBA Ballers

069 **japan now**

Japan Now gets a bit retro with the remake of Last Battle and the Gunbird 1&2 double-pack for PS2

070 **play anime**

Featuring Birdy The Mighty, Kikaider 01: The Animation, Gunparade March, Slayers Excellent and more

082 **play media**

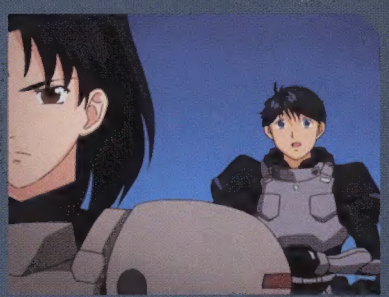
Delve into our massive summer movie preview; check out drum & bass maestro DJ Dieselboy

094 **gear**

Nokia's N-Gage is back, and this time it might have what it takes to be a contender

095 **artificial**

068 NBA Ballers



074 Gunparade March

090 The Matrix Revolutions

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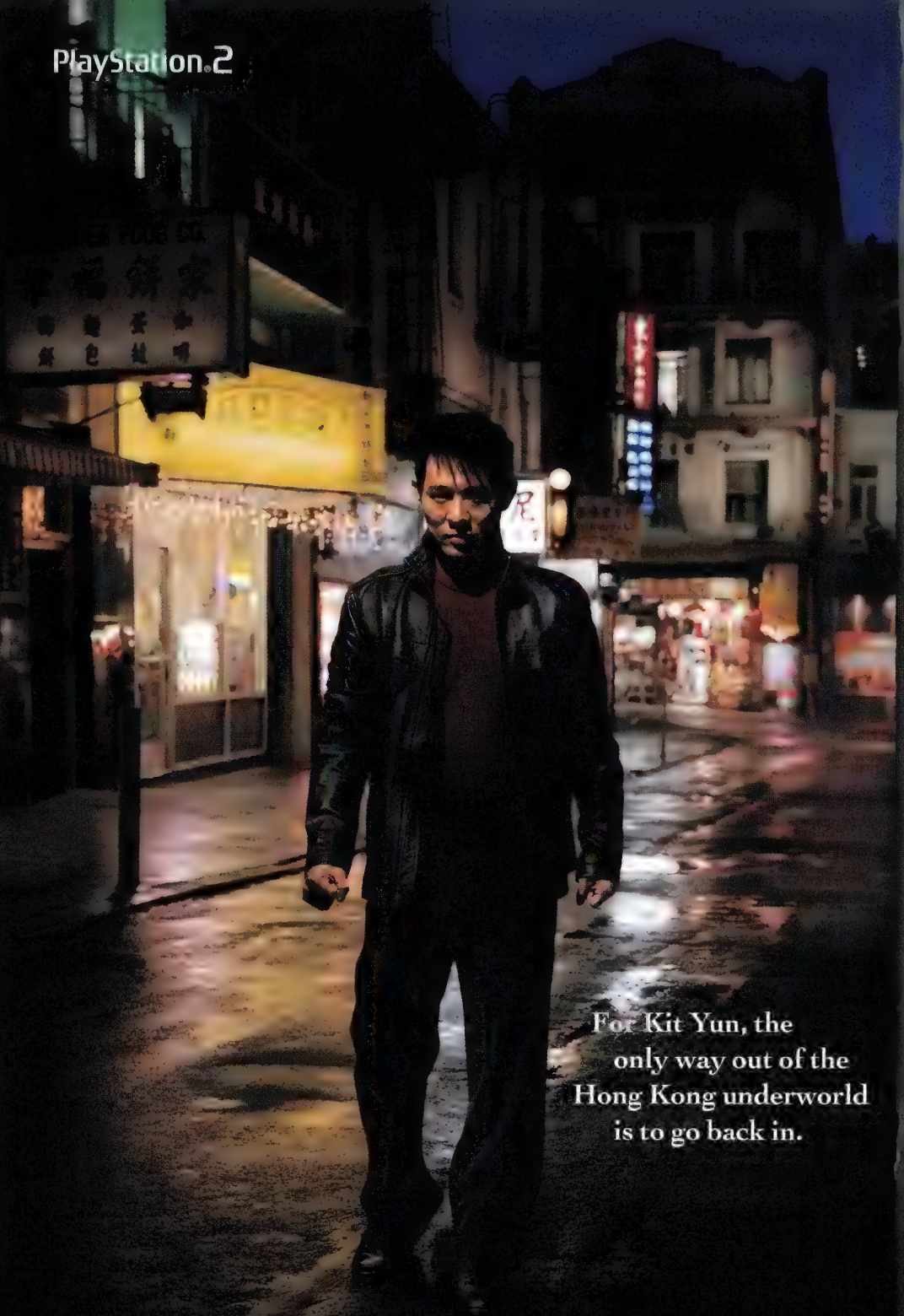
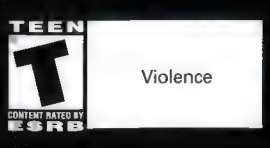
JET LI RISE TO HONOR



For Kit Yun, the only way out of the Hong Kong underworld is to go back in.

A dying man's last wish. An undercover cop who's running out of time. Jet Li is Kit Yun in Rise to Honor, the story of a cop sworn to fulfill his duty, yet bound by a promise to a powerful crime lord. Now Kit must enter a shadowy world where, to preserve his honor, he'll have to risk his life. But as his enemies will soon learn, sometimes the one who is most honorable…is also the most deadly.



Violence

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Letter of the Month

Hi Play,

I got my April '04 issue in the mail yesterday, and, as always, the editorial struck a deep chord within me. I knew back in October of last year that the oncoming glut of games would have drastic consequences for the lesser-known titles. There was no way around it, really—the average consumer (and most hardcore as well) only has so much money they can allot to games, no matter how much they love the pastime or how good most of the games may be.

I happen to be one of the fortunate who owns all the current consoles and handhelds and who can afford to buy all the games that I want (I own all the games you mentioned in the editorial and then some), but I must say that this past holiday season almost broke me. I never thought that there could be too many good games, but I was dead wrong. I'm not ashamed to say that on more than one occasion, I actually cried when I got my credit card bill. My record number of games bought within a one-week period reached a total of **11 games!** My husband was an absolute angel through this—he understands my gaming passion and lets me buy what I want over the holidays, though he's not ecstatic about it (he's not a gamer himself). He never said a word, to his extreme credit.

While I'm happy to have all these games, never before have I dreaded the sight of the FedEx truck like I did this past year. And now it sounds like this holiday season will be more of the same. I really don't want to go through that again, and while I absolutely wholeheartedly agree with your editorial, at the same time I'm left wondering what we gamers can do about the situation. It's not that we don't want the games, we do—it's just that there's only so much that we can afford! The movie and music industries seem to have grasped the concept that people buy movies and CDs all year round, not just during the holidays, so why can't the games industry?? What can we do, as the people who support and love this hobby, to make the publishers understand that everybody wins if games are brought to retail in a steady stream instead of one massive glut? If we don't manage to buy all the games we want over the holidays, then it sends the wrong message to the small developers and publishers—that their game was bad, when maybe it just got overshadowed by titles that people are more familiar with (and were not necessarily better). Can Play and its readers join together and somehow stop this from happening in future years?

As a side note, I found it extremely funny that just a few pages away from the editorial, in the Rumors and Bits section of Ink, the delay of Sony's PSP was labeled as "ain't good news." No, no, no! It **is** good news, in fact it's **wonderful** news, because now I don't have to worry about shelling out $299 for a handheld in addition to trying to stay afloat in the software flood!!! Additionally, I'll have something to look forward to during the traditionally slow post-holiday months.

> "The movie and music industries seem to have grasped the concept that people buy movies and CDs all year round, not just during the holidays, so why can't the games industry??"

Anyways, thanks for reading, and for continuing to be the most artistic and thought-provoking games magazine out there. No one else even comes close!

Sincerely,
Kelly Mummert

Thanks Kelly. We hope our readers will be vocal and email publishers when stuff is awry (hit those contacts on their web sites and fill out those reg. cards). All we can do is point things out; it's all of you who can really make the difference. As for the PSP... well, we're still sad. We love that you're the gamer in the house. Get that man a controller!

And the winner isn't...

I remember reading last year's GOTY awards in Play magazine, and was shocked (and pleasantly surprised!) that you all gave credit where others did not—GunValkyrie was recognized as not only an excellent action-shooter, but Kelley, its femme fatale, was honored as well. You guys even recognized the "cool" of Hotsuma and his scarf. I was compelled by the coverage, the graphic design, and the content as a whole to get my first video game magazine subscription!

Fast forward to GOTY 2K4. I was okay with Zelda getting GOTY. Millions love that little elf, and you guys did too. But the one thing that stuck in my mind was the RPG-GOTY: FFX-2? I bought the game on release day, because I wanted to know what happened to Spira and all its inhabitants, and I liked the characters. FFX-2 had great character designs (hey, the girls look great, and the designs are fooly-cooly-crazy), good combat-gameplay, and I didn't mind at all that there were only the three girls or the J-pop tunes. I knew what to expect, and what I was getting into. Unfortunately for me, FFX-2 lacked the magic I was looking for in my RPG-fix. I think it was the Gullwings theme that got on my nerves, prompting me to stop playing it, and instead, play last-gen RPGs (Persona 2 and Lunar). You all loved FFX-2, and I can diggit. I am a self-proclaimed FF-fanboy (have loved FFs and thought the World was Square since the original on NES; still believe FFVI is the best FF ever, followed closely by FF Tactics and FFVIII…but honestly, Square Enix has yet to impress me this next-gen, but that's not what I'm here to rant about)! Okay, the real reason I wrote—you guys didn't "get" Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic. I felt like it almost shouldn't have been mentioned in your GOTY listings, especially if you didn't know why it should be mentioned along with Japan's finest. I enjoyed Xenosaga. I loved the "long" cutscenes even. But, in my humble opinion, neither FFX-2 or Xenosaga even compared to SWKOTOR. I read that it was too wordy or it had too much text—I turned the subtitles off, and was impressed by the voice acting, as I had been only once before (the original Metal Gear Solid). The character designs and the armor, etc., left a bit to be desired, but where the game shined for me was immersion and gameplay. They gave me choices, and I loved the game for it. It wasn't here's a question, Yes or No will do (but it doesn't really matter anyway). I felt involved with the decisions. I cared enough to talk to all my party members, and this again, was due in part to the excellent voice acting, but also because I enjoyed the writing, the story, etc. Now the gameplay, I found to be the best thing to ever happen to turn-based console-RPG combat. You could tailor it to your liking—I made it so the game would only pause when the enemies were initially in-sight. Otherwise, I was switching off, queuing attacks, changing them when appropriate; my favorite thing to do was have three Jedi do some serious combo-action (i.e. insanity + force wave + force storm = TRIPLE TECH attacks!). Oh, and I never felt the battles disrupted the flow of the game, but felt natural in its non-random encounter world where no one would stand idle while I assigned my strategies. I was also addicted to hitting 'Y' immediately after a victory (even better than victory dances)!

If you couldn't tell, SWKOTOR is my favorite next-gen RPG to date. And it's not because I'm in the Jedi religion (definitely not)—I wasn't even going to buy the game originally because it was Star Wars (thanks, Episode I & II). But I love RPGs, and I read about the gameplay that SWKOTOR was offering, and liked what I read. When I played it, it felt like Xmas, but more than that, it felt like the next level for console-RPGs, with its well-written story, excellent voice-acting, immersion, and above all else, fun gameplay. That's what keeps us all playing, and although you can imagine my disappointment with my favorite gaming magazine's opinion on my favorite RPG, it was all good when Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi was recommended!

I don't know how to feel about Abenobashi, except that it's absolutely hilarious! It's just that I know every reference they're making (I can imagine Arumi not understanding any of us!)—but I digress! Thanks for keeping up the good work, and keep the anime section for sure! But never forget you guys are a gaming magazine, and the best one at that. Lastly—wow, is Ninja Gaiden the ultimate action-adventure or what??

Sincerely,
Johnny T.

P.S.: I'm hoping Square Enix delivers the goods with Front Mission IV or Star Ocean: Til The End Of Time. As far as RPGs go, I am looking forward to Jade Empire the most, can hardly believe Fable will be here this summer, Sudeki as well, and hopefully we get Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne this fall (please let this be true, Atlus USA!). It's going to be another great year for RPGs, and don't forget FFXII (2K5?)!

JT, when it comes to this one, even we don't get why we don't get it. Well, let me rephrase that: we know why, I guess we don't understand how no one else considers mediocre art and animation a bad thing. Flat out, the character design is lacking and the animation unnatural. The fact that it's so deep is all the more reason it needs to have compelling art, and characters we really want to get into. FF X-2 and Xenosaga are as much works of art as they are great RPGs, hence the order. Oh, and yes, Ninja Gaiden is the ultimate action-adventure.

And now, a rhyme...

Holy, moly
I must know,
Have you rocked
Ninja Five-O?

If not yet
Then I must say,
"Find a copy
Right away."

I'm so hooked
I cannot quit.
Don't you miss
This sleeper hit.

Just a friendly bit of advice to you and all that you can spread this too ;)

j

Beefs and bouquets

I would like to commend you and your staff for publishing one of the most informative and professional magazines available to gaming consumers. However, empty compliments don't do much for inspiration, so instead I'd like to offer a few suggestions for future issues.

1. I never read the "Girls of Gaming" issue, so it may be that I missed out on an inspiring celebration of gender equality. However, I've got a feeling it was more along the line of centerfold entertainment, which I find less appealing not only for the chauvinism, but also because it reinforces the gaming geek stereotype. It's not that I object to seeing the newest Final Fantasy babe on the cover—far from it—but I'd hate to see this magazine becoming known for its swimsuit edition.

2. I'd like to see a point/counterpoint column in your magazine. Issues are no more than party slogans if the other side isn't presented. Without a counterpoint, we even run the risk of failing to recognize what the issues are. I realize that your magazine does try to champion the underdog, such as 2D games, which is wonderful. This sort of column would give you a chance to take those issues away from the editor's soapbox (not that it's a bad thing) and into the arena of debate.

3. Along the lines of objectivity, I'd love to see just a little feature, no more than a paragraph, that shows where you blew it in previous issues, either lauding a game which would later bomb, or mocking what is now considered a classic. It might be fun. (Along those lines, your "Rewind" feature gets my heartfelt applause.)

In order to end on a positive note, I was pleasantly surprised to see that the March 2004 reviews didn't contain a single review higher than a B+. Sometimes, it's just not a stellar month for games, and I'm glad you didn't try to hide the fact.

Sincerely,
Denton F.

A lot of people presumed Girls of Gaming would be gratuitous, and while it does feature sexy video game females (they don't make them any other way), the emphasis was on celebrating the characters and the artists who created them. Nearly each and every creator actually chimed in. GoG 2 will be even more in-depth. As far as stating poor game sales vs. high reviews…sometimes the best games sell the least, in fact, more so now than ever. Panzer Dragoon, Jet Set Radio Future, etc., etc., are no less great because they didn't sell well. Now, mocking so-called "classics," well, that could be fun.

Time to become a chiropractor

I've just recently subscribed to Play. In fact, I just got my first issue (not from the store, at least) yesterday. I was really surprised by the letter of the month; it was incredibly insightful. I never really thought about it before, but it's true that men in video games suffer from the same gotta-be-sexy syndrome as women. In the defense of female gamers (or perhaps just myself, because I don't know how many other girls feel this way), I really have no problem with the way women are portrayed in video games. First of all, a lot of those outfits really aren't so skimpy. When I hear "skimpy," I think mini-skirt and barely there tube top. Realistically, girls in some games actually tend to be fairly well covered, but because they might be wearing short shorts or a tank top, they're dressing too "skimpy." Spare me! I enjoyed the outfits in FFX-2 and I really think there's just no problem with it. So maybe I'm crazy, but for me, whether it's yummy girls or yummy guys, it's all good. Although I have to admit, breast sizes tend to border on ridiculous in a lot of games. For example, the girl from Sudeki on the cover. Between wielding that staff, and those boobs, the girl is gonna need a good chiropractor soon. I guess there's just no happy medium, is there?

Beth J.

It appears not. In Allish's defense though, she is wearing a thick brass bustier.

Rodriguez ramble

In your recent interview with Michelle Rodriguez, you described her as a "big-time gamer." A more accurate description would be a mainstream gamer. If she were a true gamer, that being she plays them for the gameplay and not just good graphics, her system of choice would not be the Xbox. More evidence that supports this hypothesis is that she states that the GameCube is mostly for kids, not her deal. The games Nintendo makes, while most do have a child-like appearance, they will take more than your average elementary student to complete. Is a seven year-old going to be able to complete all of the events in Super Smash Bros. or collect all of the Shines in Mario Sunshine? I don't think so. Michelle, along with most of the misguided kids of this country, thinks unless you're killing 50 guys that look the same that it is not cool or that you are not having fun. Mario doesn't need to sneak up on a Koopa Troopa and blow its head clean off with a double-barrel for it to be an enjoyable experience. Since Super Mario Bros. on the NES, the Mario games have never been about the graphics, but the gameplay. The brilliant platforming action was what made millions of gamers fall in love with the Mario series back then, not the ability to decapitate a Goomba. If the new generation of kids would embrace the gameplay-over-graphics theory, and not adopt some junior high mentality that killing people in a game is cool, the GameCube would be the number-one selling console. Hopefully people will turn back to Nintendo, the company that reinvented the console industry in 1985, and still continues to do so even to this day.

Ryan Wobma

P.S. Michelle says she is, and I quote, a "huge fan" of Resident Evil, and yet she doesn't play GameCube. With the remake of the first Resident Evil, Resident Evil Zero, and the upcoming fourth installment, all only for Nintendo GameCube, I don't think you can call yourself a huge fan of Resident Evil without playing GameCube.

By actress standards, trust us: Michelle is big-time. That said, we're with you on the first-party Nintendo front—those are the games that help keep the fire burning. Not that PS2 or Xbox are slouches either.

First PSP game revealed

Backbone's Death Jr. takes GDC by storm

One of the biggest surprises at the 2004 Game Developers Conference was live footage of Backbone Entertainment's (formerly Digital Eclipse) first Sony PSP game: Death Jr. While little is known about the depth of the gameplay, it's obvious that it's a 3D action-adventure involving a diminutive reaper (Scyther) who commands one massive sickle to get around, as well as various big guns. The most surprising aspect of the game demo, however, was the 3D power pumping out of the PSP, which seems to hover somewhere between PS and PS2, leaning more towards PS2 quality...and this was merely a first-look demo. As you can see from looking at Scyther's in-game model (below), he wears a nicely detailed cloak and appears quite seamless. Elsewhere, the in-game animation is especially smooth, not to mention overflowing with lighting and particle effects. Not bad, considering the system launch is a year away. (Sony announced the PSP was scheduled to hit before March 31, 2005 during GDC.) Portable gaming just got a whole lot more interesting.

Scared yet?
He may not look so imposing, but his sickle packs a mighty wallop and provides great mobility.

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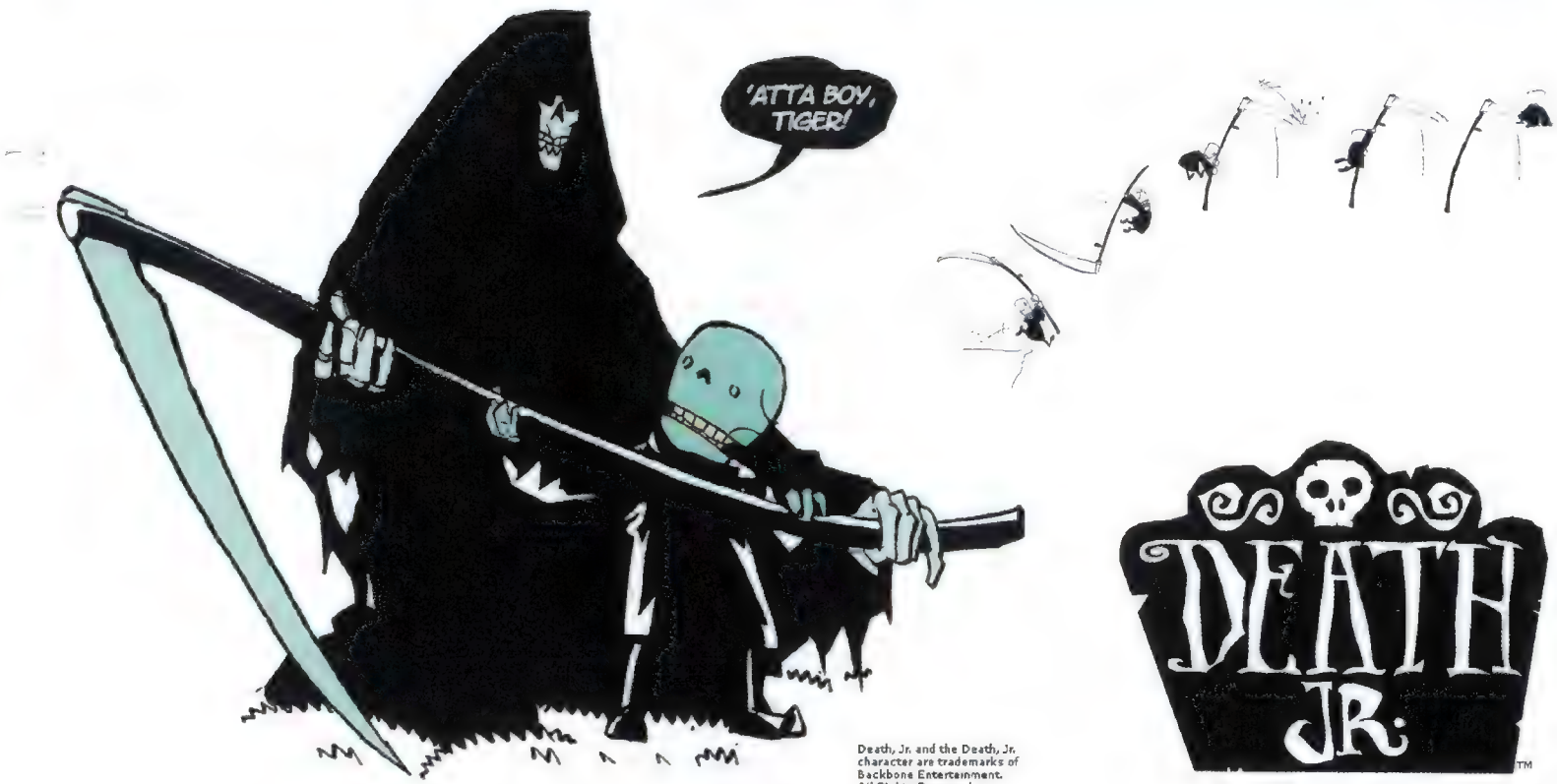

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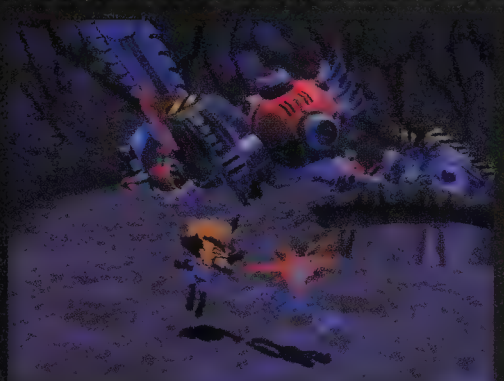
Crash Landing

In Crash's next console outing, he has a new ally: his worst enemy



This fall, Crash will do the unthinkable and team up with none other than Dr. Cortex in Traveller's Tales' latest Crash offering, Crash Twinsanity, coming to PS2 and Xbox. In a storyline fashioned by award-winning animation filmmaker Jordan Reichek of Perky Pickle Studios (Ren & Stimpy), Crash and his long time nemesis, the irrepressible Neo Cortex, will partake in "unprecedented" new dual-gameplay mechanics as they take on a new adversary scary enough to drive them together—The Evil Twins—who've arrived on Crash's island paradise with an agenda of mass destruction. "Crash Twinsanity reinvigorates the 3D action-platform genre by combining the well-known humor and wacky situations that Crash is known for with cutting-edge, inventive gameplay elements that will make this game the most robust and funniest Crash experience ever," said Luc Vanhal, president and COO, North America for VU Games, Crash's publisher. Through the unorthodox partnership, Cortex is abused as Crash's favorite weapon when Crash and Cortex are controlled as one. Additionally, the new pairing will inspire "never-before-seen" play mechanics which also include cooperative level designs in which Crash must protect Cortex and vice-versa...albeit reluctantly.

A Myriad of Possibilities

Argonaut reveals new game engine

If developer Argonaut makes a new I-Ninja, Malice or Croc that completely blows our minds, don't say you weren't warned. Myriad, a brand-new technology developed by Argonaut subsidiary LTStudios, can reportedly create and populate game environments with an unprecedented amount of detailed characters for PlayStation 2, Xbox and PC. Said Andrew Parsons, MD of LTStudios: "In Myriad, we have created a highly adaptable engine and toolset which, as far as we know, can handle higher volumes of moving characters than any other engine that's currently available. We're already using many of the features of Myriad in the prototypes that we have under development." So far, Myriad has been used to create a racing game prototype, but the technology could just as easily be used to populate a military game with an army of soldiers. Given Argonaut's pedigree, where it goes from here could prove extremely exciting.

Features of Myriad (example using human figures in a city environment):

- 500 lit, skinned and fogged people at 60 fps using three levels of detail as follows: LOD 0 - (near) -1928 triangles; LOD 1 - (mid) - 1046 triangles; LOD 2 (far) 325 triangles
- 500 different and separate animations
- 500 AI decision paths
- Xbox – 21 million triangles a second
- PS2 – 16.7 million triangles a second, single bone animated. 14 million multi-bone. 32.6 million triangles per second prelit landscape system. (8 tick renderer on VU1)

Get your GameOn

Consumer video game expo announced

So you can't get into E3, eh? Here's another option: if you can make it to New York City this November 12-14, the first-ever video game consumer gathering will be going down at Madison Square Garden. Going by the name of GameOn NY, the expo will offer all sorts of cool video game-related demos, contests, tournaments, live music, celebrity happenings and a whole lot more. "With more than $11 billion in revenues in 2003, the interactive entertainment industry has become the entertainment choice of America. The response from high-level sponsors and publishers has been overwhelmingly positive," said Martin Currie, director of business development for GameOn NY. "This event will not only allow fans to get hands-on exposure to games before they hit the stores, but will also give the publishers national media exposure during the crucial holiday selling season." Check it out at www.gameonny.com.

Retro Nation

Old-school fever grips Virgin Megastores

To mirror the gaming fever that E3 spreads across the nation, Virgin is getting set to take gamers back to where it all started. Virgin Megastores will be hosting the greatest selection of old school-gaming goodies from May 11 through June 14, from Namco and Atari plug-and-play TV Games to the Midway Arcade Treasures, Namco Museum and Intellivision Lives titles for PS2, Xbox and GC. Also available will be a selection of Famicom, Sega and Namco import game soundtracks, as well as edgy books on the history and the evolution of video gaming such as "The Ultimate History of Video Games" by Steven L. Kent, "Arcade Fever" by John Sellers and the "Official Video Game and Pinball Book of World Records."

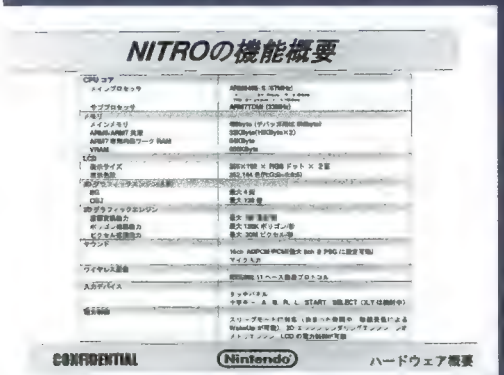
DS Specs leaked?

Possible details on Nintendo's next system

It seems you just can't keep a secret these days. For the past month, a single piece of paper posted online has been making waves in the video game community. The document in question is supposedly a Nintendo development sheet listing the hardware specs for their "Nitro" game system. Although everyone at Nintendo has been tight lipped on the validity of the spec sheet, they have confirmed that "Nitro" was the development name for the Nintendo DS portable system.

If the document proves to be legit, then the DS system will have some interesting surprises in store. First, at least one of the screens on the DS will have touch-screen capabilities. Also, the DS will include 802.11 wireless capabilities, as opposed to the Bluetooth commonly used in small devices. This means that the wireless functions will have a much greater range and could be able to support as many as 16 players at once.

Of course, without so much as a peep from Nintendo on the validity of the leaked document, all of this may prove to be nothing more than a hoax. However, if it's not a fake, the document definitely proves there's more under the hood of the DS than initially thought.



If this leaked spec sheet is legit, the Nintendo DS could be better than anyone imagined.

CPU:
Main Processor: ARM946E-S (67 MHz)
Cache: 8 KB instructions, 4 KB data
TCM: 32 KB instructions, 16 KB data
Sub Processor: ARM7TDMI (33MHz)

Memory:
Main Memory: 4 MB (8M debugging)
ARM9/ARM7 Shared: 32 KB (2 x 16 KB)
AMR7 Internal RAM: 64 KB
VRAM: 656 KB

LCD Screen:
Screen Size: 256 x 192 pixels (RGB), two screens
Colors: 262,144 (R:G:B=6:6:6)

2D Graphics Engine (A, B):
BG: Up to 4 layers
OBJ: Up to 128 objects

3D Graphics Engine:
Coordinate Transform Capability: Up to 4 million vertices/sec
Polygon Draw Rate: Up to 120,000 polygons/sec
Pixel Fill Rate: Up to 30M polygons/sec

Sound:
16-channel ADPCM/PCM (up to 8 channels can be assigned PSG)
Microphone input

Wireless Communication:
IEEE 802.11 based proprietary

Instruction input:
Touch panel
Digital pad, A, B, R, L, SELECT & start (X & Y planned)

Power Control:
Sleep mode (WakeUp possible at chosen time or due to wireless reception), 2D engine, rendering engine, geometry engine, LCD power contro

GBA, meet NES

Clasic NES Series announced

Who says the Japanese get all the cool stuff? Taking a cue from the recent release of the Famicom-themed GBA in Japan, Nintendo of America will be releasing a Classic NES Limited Edition GBA SP on June 7. Though functionally the same as a regular GBA SP, the Classic NES edition boasts a slick black, grey and red color scheme, patterned after the controller of the original Nintendo Entertainment System—wickedly cool for the hardcore gamers that grew up playing Nintendo's 8-bit wonder. But what good is a retro system without retro games? Coinciding with the release of the NES-themed GBA will be a Classic NES Series of games: ports of eight classic 8-bit titles—Super Mario Bros., The Legend of Zelda, Ice Climber, Excitebike, Donkey Kong, Pac-Man, Xevious and Bomberman—all sporting variations on their original box art and packaging. (Two other titles that saw release in Japan, Mappy and Star Soldier, are nowhere in sight.) The games will sell for $19.99 each, while the NES-themed GBA will set you back $99.99. Now you're playing with power.

Eye See Bertie Bott's Beans!

Get personal with the latest Harry Potter game

Fancy seeing yourself catching chocolate frogs, attending Seeker practice, exploding dungbombs in Zonko's Joke Shop or other such Potter-tastic pursuits? If so, you'll be happy as a lark that EA have announced that Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban will be the first third-party title to fully utilize the EyeToy. Playing as Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, and Harry himself, you'll utilize their key attributes and skills to resolve challenges and overcome enemies, unraveling the mystery surrounding Sirius Black and his escape from the infamous wizard prison, Azkaban. By donning the Sorting Hat and sorting players into their respective Hogwarts houses, Potter principals will be able to play mini-games via the EyeToy camera, with up to four players competing in a series of Potter-themed games. How positively fabulous. Someone pass me the dagger.

WWW.ROCKSTARGAMES.COM/MANHUNT

MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Strong Language
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence

PlayStation.2

XBOX

PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE

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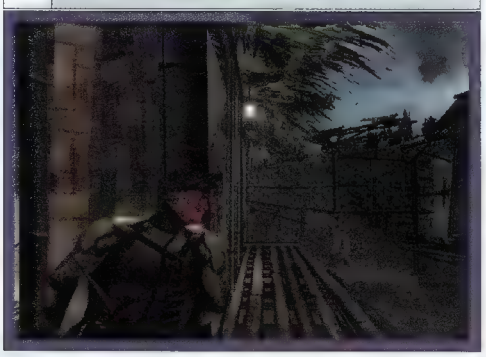
Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	**Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow** ubisoft / xb
02	**Fight Night 2004** ea / ps2
03	**Red Dead Revolver** rockstar / ps2
04	**Siren** sony / ps2
05	**Resident Evil: Outbreak** capcom / ps2
06	**MVP Baseball 2004** ea / ps2
07	**Battlefield Vietnam** ea / pc
08	**Rainbow Six 3** ubisoft / ps2
09	**Far Cry** ubisoft / pc
10	**Final Fantasy XI Online** sony / ps2



NPD/TRSTS Top Ten Feb. Game Sales

01	**Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles** nintendo / gc
02	**NFL Street** ea / ps2
03	**Metroid: Zero Mission** nintendo / gba
04	**Need for Speed Underground** ea / ps2
05	**007: Everything or Nothing** ea / ps2
06	**Rise to Honor** sony / ps2
07	**Champions of Norrath** sony / ps2
08	**Halo** microsoft / xb
09	**Madden NFL 2004** ea / ps2
10	**007: Everything or Nothing** ea / xb

Your Megastore Beckons!

Siren
sony / ps2

Save a Japanese village from the living dead in this chilling, unique and often challenging take on the survival horror genre.

Resident Evil: Outbreak
capcom / ps2

Become one of eight characters and try to escape Raccoon City. Only through teamwork will you avoid falling victim to the dreaded T-virus.

Red Dead Revolver
rockstar / ps2

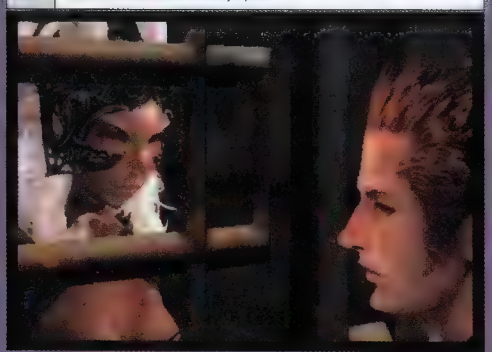
Red's been wronged and he's out for revenge. Fierce shootouts, horseback riding and train chases are among RDR's many Old West highlights.

Staff and reader selections

vote for your most wanted games! database@playmagazine.com

Readers' Most Wanted database@playmagazine.com

01	**Final Fantasy XII** square enix / ps2
02	**Halo 2** microsoft / xb
03	**Xenosaga Episode II** namco / ps2
04	**Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater** konami / ps2
05	**Gran Turismo 4** sony / ps2



Dave Halverson editor in chief

01	**Ninja Gaiden** tecmo / xb
02	**Astro Boy** sega / ps2
03	**Samurai Jack** sega / xb
04	**Malice** mud duck / xb
05	**Initial D Special Stage** activision / xb

Brady Fiechter executive editor

01	**Ninja Gaiden** tecmo / xb
02	**Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow** ubisoft / xb
03	**Siren** sony / ps2
04	**World Soccer Winning Eleven 7** konami / ps2
05	**NBA Ballers** midway / ps2

Chris Hoffman some editor

01	**Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal** sony / ps2
02	**Ninja Gaiden** tecmo / xb
03	**Mario vs. Donkey Kong** nintendo / gba
04	**Jak 3** sony / ps2
05	**Final Fantasy X-2** square enix / ps2

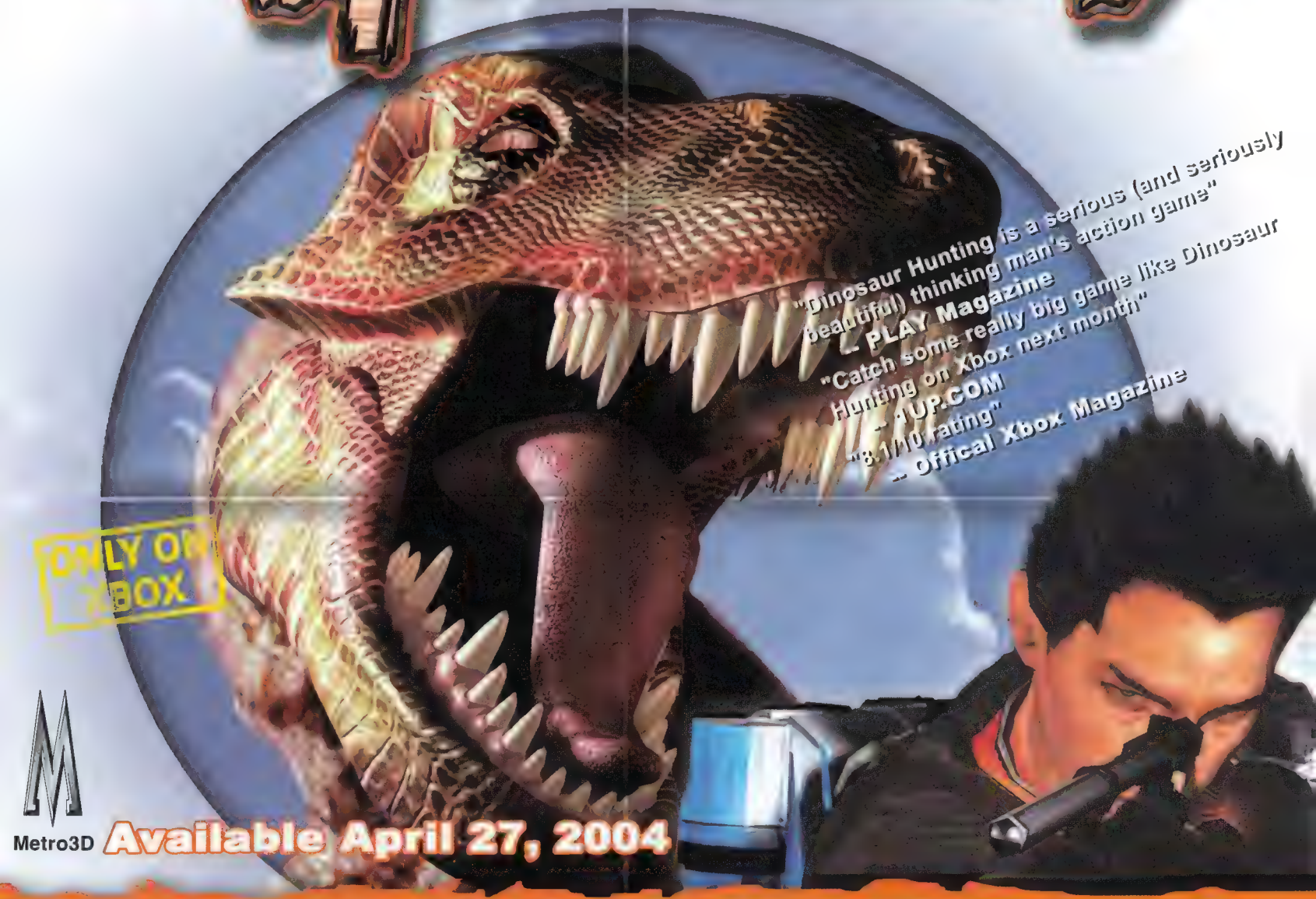
Michael Hobbs art director

01	**Final Fantasy XI Online** square enix / pc
02	**Ninja Gaiden** tecmo / xbox
03	**Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes** konami / ps2
04	**Resident Evil: Outbreak** sony / ps2
05	**Dragonquest V** square enix / ps2 (import)

Nelson Lui associate art director

01	**Ninja Gaiden** tecmo / xb
02	**River City Ransom EX** atlus / gba
03	**Resident Evil: Outbreak** capcom / ps2
04	**Winning Eleven 7 International** konami / ps2
05	**Colin McRae Rally 04** codemasters / xb

DINOSAUR HUNTING



"Dinosaur Hunting is a serious (and seriously beautiful) thinking man's action game"
-- PLAY Magazine

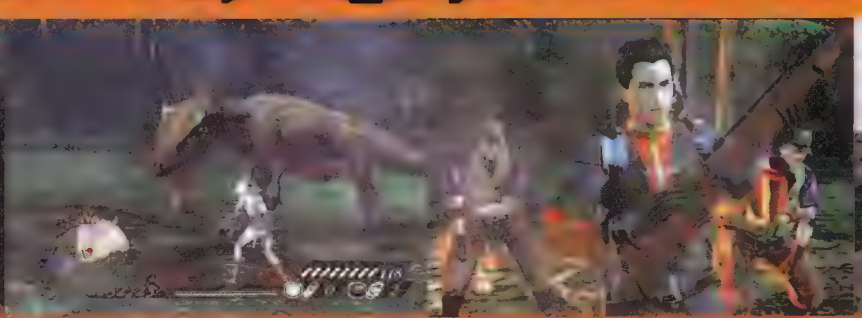
"Catch some really big game like Dinosaur Hunting on Xbox next month"
-- 1UP.COM

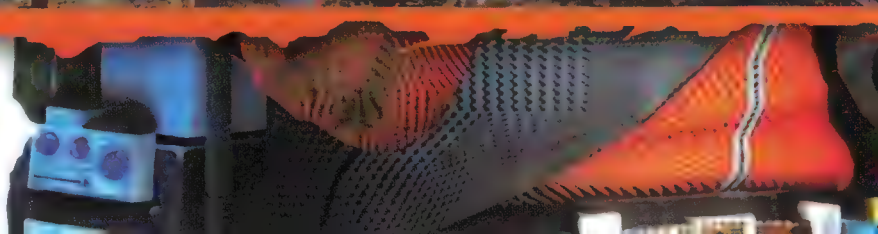
"8.1/10 rating"
-- Offical Xbox Magazine

ONLY ON XBOX

Metro3D

Available April 27, 2004





TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Mild language
Violence

XBOX

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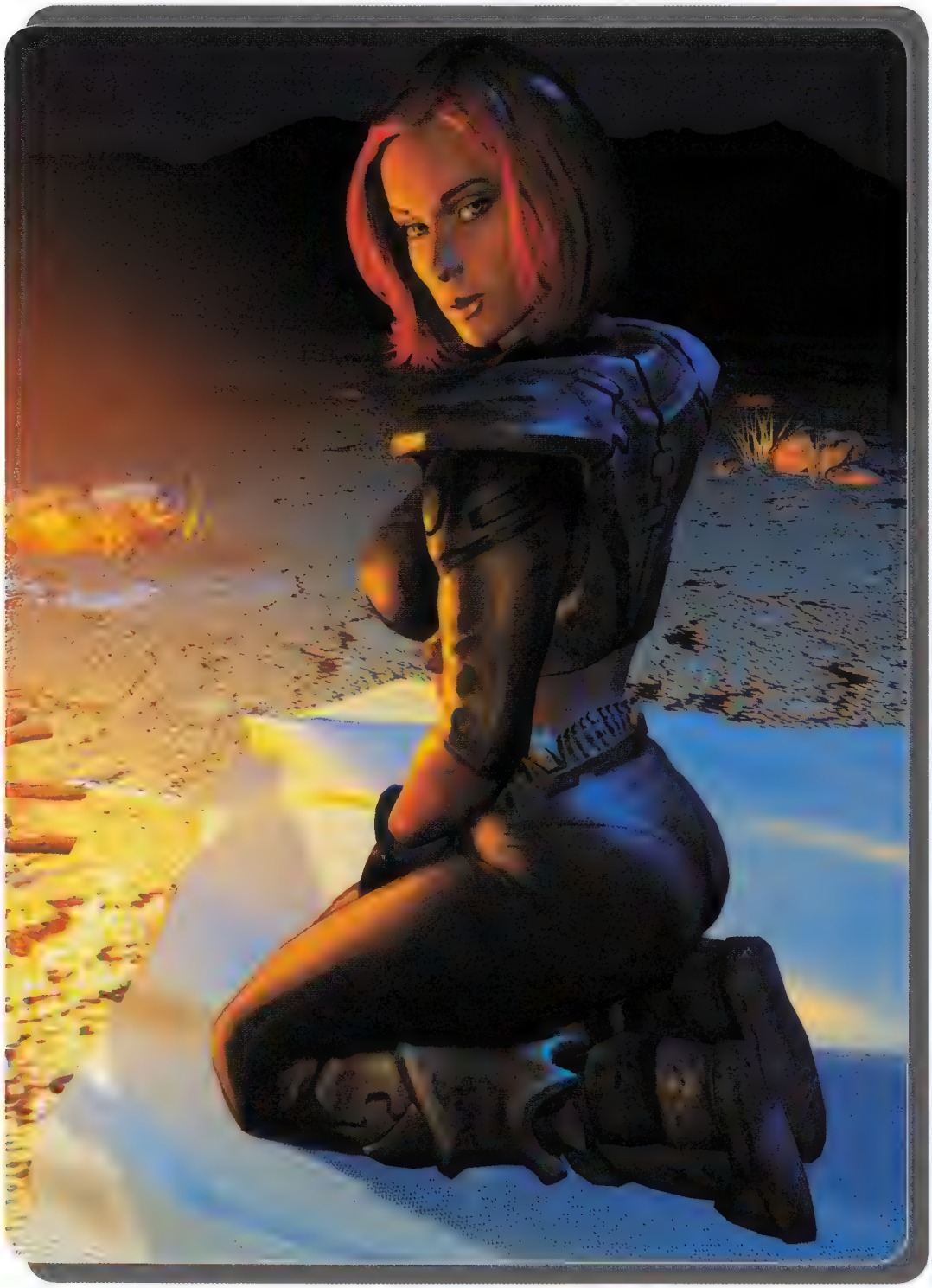

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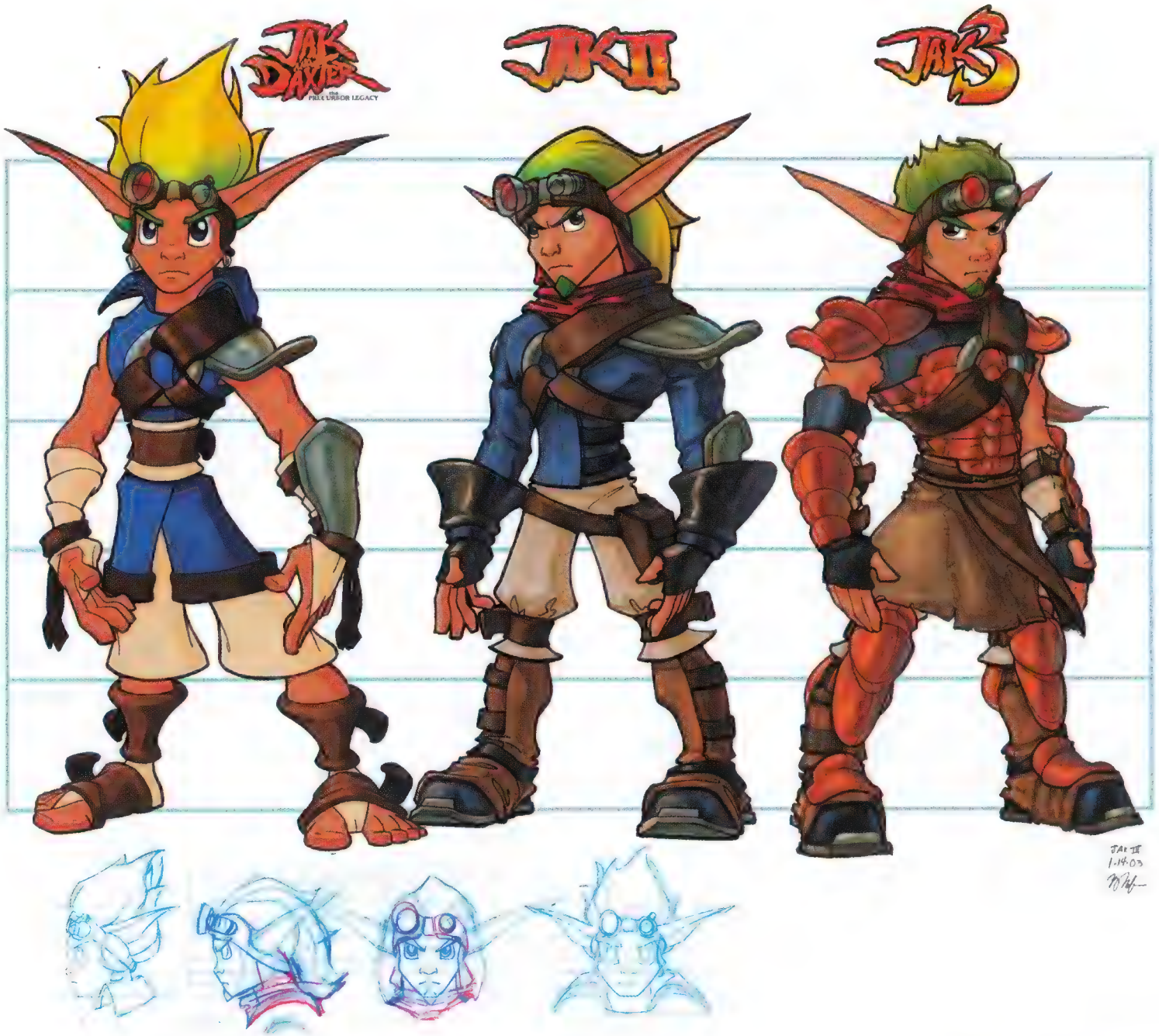


play games

NEO CONTRA

Will the series' third 3D makeover be the charm? Yup.

In Neo Contra, you shoot stuff. When you shoot stuff, the stuff explodes and crumbles, disintegrates and shatters, dissolves and melts real good. When you clear the area of every last morsel of enemy soldier, mounted weapon, vile monster, cool machine and squishy thing that simply needs to be shot, you move on and do it again. Why? Because strategically shooting stuff is just so damn engaging, such a visceral experience, a high-energy assault on the gaming senses we've loved from the start. When the war is over, you have to disinfect the controller to avoid a sweaty stench. The accomplishment is grand, the high off the charts. The heart actually pounds, and a wholly unique side of your gaming emotions is fully tapped. Like a religious experience that lights up certain areas of the brain, there's a spot...

Ok, hell: a great action game is just fun. Especially when it's handled with this kind of kinetic flare and raucous presentation.

There's little time for hiding; once the bullets fly, you gotta buckle down and wipe the area clean.

The perspective is constantly shifting, taking you through a rollercoaster ride of scenarios.

Neo Contra producer Nobuya Nakazato knows the basic rule: "First of all, you have to find something that you think is fun. Then you need to know why it is that way, and how others will perceive it. Then you need to analyze it objectively. Lastly, you are taking the maximum effort to express it effectively, so that it comes down to your communication ability."

Asking someone to adequately distill in words what it takes to make a great action game is probably a reach. A good designer just has to be jacked into the ineffable. "To come up with a fun idea is not so easy, when under pressure," says Nakazato. "It usually comes up when you're relaxing or doing something irrelevant. But when you're stuck and in a slump, then it's really tough."

Neo Contra is an action game in the purest sense. It's meant to assault you with little breaks outside of quick transitional scenes and the occasional intentionally silly boss banter—no need for serious strain here. You're rated at the end of each stage with a letter grade and simple score tally that alerts you to just how efficient you were at blowing everything up. There are no puzzles to slow you down or complex level structures where you'll need to constantly refer to a map. For a game like this to engage us, it's oh so important that the incessant combat be focused in a way that we're not plowing through the motions without genuine impact.

"In action games, I think the most important thing is overall balance," explains Nakazato. "Let's say there was some extravagant explosion effect and the same effect keeps appearing throughout the stage. The player will gradually get used to this environment, and the excitement will dwindle as players progress through the game. In order to make it extravagant in an effective way, you need to balance out the small and mid explosions. Same thing can be said with adjusting the difficulty levels or enemy set... The stage bosses and mid bosses play key roles in the game. With boss enemies, the reasoning behind big bosses is that they're gigantic and tough to defeat. But varying the size of the bosses also helps balance the tension in the game. We designed the boss battles to be very instinctive. If anyone wants to achieve a score of 100 percent in the Hit Rate System, the player is required to find out the enemies' weaknesses by traveling to different areas in the stage or determining the best order to defeat all the bosses in the game."

"Games cannot be dependent upon graphics alone."

Nobuya Nakazato, producer

And just how much of a chore will it be to not only pick those menacing bosses apart, but get to them in the first place? The 17-year-old Contra series has never balked at keeping the difficulty level high. "Contra has always been known for its challenging gameplay," agrees Nakazato. "Gamers and fans of the series expect this level of difficulty, so we won't make it easy. However, we wanted to make the game more accessible to all gamers, so we have introduced an Easy Mode, as well as a new mode to select more lives. We're doing our best to reach a wider audience so they can enjoy the game."

Getting it all right is certainly a process and not necessarily always up to personal instinct. "When you see gamers stuck in the same area over and over again or see some situation where the player defeated the enemy from luck, then the game is not balanced well," explains Nakazato. "I think a properly balanced game is when the players gradually increase in skill level as they progress through game... Being so close to the game for a long period of time, it's hard to be objective—you basically become numb to a certain point. Since our team is dealing with the game every day, it's challenging to keep a fresh perspective that we had on the first day of development.

Commander Bill Rizer returns to duty, joined by samurai Genbei Jaguer Yagyu.

"...we are very satisfied with the direction we took with the game."

Nobuya Nakazato, producer

However, we schedule regular feedback sessions within the studio to adjust the gameplay according to the new comments/feedback since we're so close to the project."

The only other version of Contra to appear on the PlayStation 2 was Shattered Soldier, which Nakazato also produced and has obviously used as a springboard for this evolved installment. If anyone knows how to make a proper Contra, it's Nakazato, whose credits go as unusually far back as Alien Wars (SNES) and Hard Corps (Genesis)—two of what many fans consider the pinnacle of the series. "With Shattered Soldier, I was focused on creating the best game design—something that was hard to achieve back in the 16-bit days," says Nakazato. "With Neo Contra, we departed from the side-scrolling gameplay and faced a new challenge in creating a different style of gameplay. Technically speaking, a lot of the elements have changed from previous games. Yet, the most essential parts of the series and our past game design experience, such as the fast-paced action and dramatic presentation, are still reflected in the new game. We accomplished what we wanted to do with 2D side-scrolling in Shattered Soldier, so what we discussed from the beginning was to take a different approach. We had multiple discussions based upon three basic points: player freedom, fast-paced action and tight controls."

The transition from Shattered Soldier's side-scrolling presentation to this newly dynamic 3D environment seems perfectly fitting, opening up a whole new set of possibilities. Most importantly, the end result is distinctly Contra. "When we first started planning for Neo Contra, we decided our policy was to express the fun parts of the Contra series in a different perspective," begins Nakazato. "We started analyzing the exciting features of past Contra games to figure out what really made it fun. We incorporated the elements that we thought would transition well into the new version. As you'll see, Neo Contra is true to the classic Contra game experience, but there were parts of past games that we loved that could not be implemented. Overall, we are very satisfied with the direction we took with the game."

With this new direction comes some awesome moments. The continually shifting perspective is a blast, taking us through everything from free-fall battles after chasing an escaping boss down a chute to top-down stretches of manic shootouts to long shots of our heroes scaling up a treacherous building, screaming soldiers falling to their doom all around. When the side-scrolling perspective comes into play, the developers have injected such visual and gameplay invention into the mix that you never once feel restricted to a rigid formula.

The thrill of the chase is nonstop, thanks in no small part to the excellent use of sound adding to the charge. There's even a bit of house music sprinkled into the soundtrack along with grinding metal. "Since Neo Contra takes place in the future, I have adopted a techno and electronic taste," explains music composer Sota Fujimori. "At the same time, I've incorporated music styles of past games. In order to enhance Contra's game experience, we have incorporated more variations with the soundtrack. I tried to match the fast-paced action with upbeat and intense sounds. One of my favorite instruments to use to create these sounds is the synthesizer. I hope the fans enjoy the Neo Contra music!" This fan certainly does: it fits the mood surprisingly well and isn't what you might expect.

Study the Neo Contra screenshots closely and, as a fan, you've gotta smile: the omnipotent spread shot returns!

But, as in Shattered Soldier, you don't gather power-ups to acquire this or any of the other weapons during the firefights. Initially, there are three sets with three weapons each to choose from, all offering widely varying ranges of power and modes of use. My personal favorite includes a machine gun, grenade bomb and lock-on missile. There's also a trio of a charge shot, fire whip and lock-on laser, as well as spread, classic fireball and lock-on charge. "There's no right answer for the weapon selection," says Nakazato. "Some can be 'easy to use, but small fire' or 'for expert, but powerful.' We're adjusting each set to have a unique personality. With different weapon sets, the battle strategies will differ, and I would suggest that gamers try it out and play multiple times using a different weapon selection."

If you take a liking to one particular weapon, you will can't blast through the game relying on the same technique. One of the newest additions to really bring up the strategy level is the aerial lock-on, which is the only way to tag certain enemies and wear down key areas on a boss and his surrounding barriers. A shift technique must be constantly employed to properly focus your intense firepower and maneuver through the endless walls of artillery spray. The more you play Neo Contra, the more you begin to really see how intricately and cleverly designed the game is.

It's that keen design sense for an engaging action setup that really defines Neo Contra: object placement, for example, as simple as a railing that rearranges your weapon strategy or forces your movement into another spot of fire.

A friend once made an interesting comment that he likes to imagine what a game like this might be like if you replaced all the slick machinery and settings with dots. Are the patterns and movements created in such a calculated way that you're engaged? There are too many games today that would fall apart without the visual support. Nakazato nails it: "I think the best action game is something that makes players want to go back and pick up the game and play it over and over again. Games cannot be dependent upon graphics alone. The really good games will never fade, even 10 years after the release date. Good content determines the best action games."

But yes, now more than ever, visual presence does matter more than matter. No worries here. Filled with an incredibly unique style and richly drawn toward a mix of fantasy and hyper-reality, Neo Contra's universe joins the gameplay as a fine accomplishment. "We are taking a more realistic approach to the game and avoided unrealistic weapons, trying to emphasize actual military vehicles," Nakazato points out. "In this realistic environment, the main characters still have some amazing acrobatic skills, which creates a more thrilling experience. This style is true to the Contra series as a whole. Also, director Takeshi Ando's background as a designer and a mech maniac has influenced Neo Contra's gameplay style."

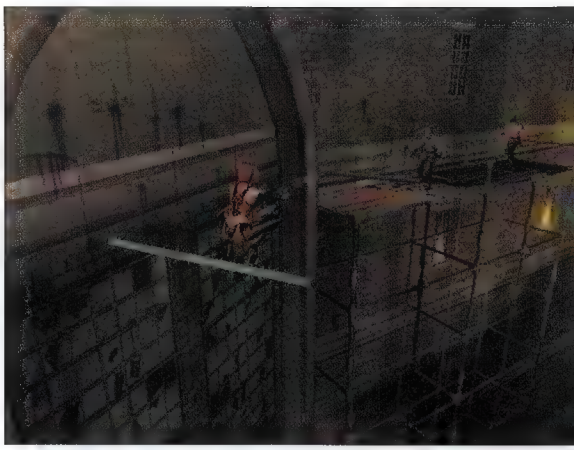
The bosses are a big part of Neo Contra's visual scope, so they had to look as good as they do. There's nothing like a giant vomiting baby head popping out of a blooming mouth lined with teeth that look like they could shred an elephant. Nakazato briefly explains what they're going for: "We are not looking to have an integrated design for all the enemies. Rather, we took a direction to make the bosses even more varied. I listed out the minimal guidelines and restrictions from a game design perspective. Given such rules, each designer came up with their own ideas. I'm amazed with the results since they're all unique and interesting."

For all you major Contra fans, one of the obvious questions is: can a friend join you in the fun? Well, duh: like from the beginning of time (Contra on NES, 1988), Contra's fully on fire with a buddy fighting by your side, and here, despite the new presentation, there's no exception. While questions are being answered: yes, the game is substantially longer than Shattered Soldier and, yes, you'll have incentive to play over and over. "Just like Shattered Soldier, we'll have multiple endings. Aside from that, items like hidden weapon sets and hidden characters are the things we're currently planning," Nakazato points out. "We'll have more bonus features so that the gamers are compelled to play many times. Look forward to the hidden weapon sets, as they will be a lot more unique and powerful." And as for Lucia? "All I can say is that she'll make an appearance in the game. However, for those who played Shattered Soldier, her role in this game may be a bit of a shock. You'll have to wait and see what happens."
Brady Fiechter

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Tokyo
Publisher: Konami
Available: November

Bloodrayne 2

Let the blood rain



There's nothing quite as lovely as watching an über-hot Dhampir use helpless flailing bodies as a means of level progression—just one of the many new ways to get ahead (or "a head," heh) in the all-new and much improved BloodRayne sequel.

As an advocate of the original—able to look past the collision miscues and sink my teeth into the core ideal—nothing pleases me more than seeing Terminal Reality and Majesco seal the deal on the franchise by addressing the first game's collision woes while adding body bags of horrible new features. The TR and Majesco brain trust (along with the industry's most savvy female brand manager) have a firm grasp on where to nip and tuck their macabre mistress. The new BloodRayne works poles PoP-style and then some, dangling and swinging like a homicidal stripper, and slides down rails, thunking off body parts like a rail-grinding guillotine.

The Infernal Engine now amped to epic new proportions, the environments look markedly better, drenched in fine detail and rich textures, and are bursting with ways for the all-new motion-captured BloodRayne to ravage her prey. Massive ventilation fan blocking your path? Just add bodies with BloodRayne's grappling hook and it's problem solved—dinner is served. Deemed "killing puzzles" (m'kay, I suppose everything's got to have a name), she can essentially use her hook to pull large, heavy, metal objects onto pesky (and lets not forget squishy) mortals and/or toss them about like rag dolls. Speaking of which, if you like your game's physics fun, pretty much everything in BloodRayne 2 has realistic physics attached.

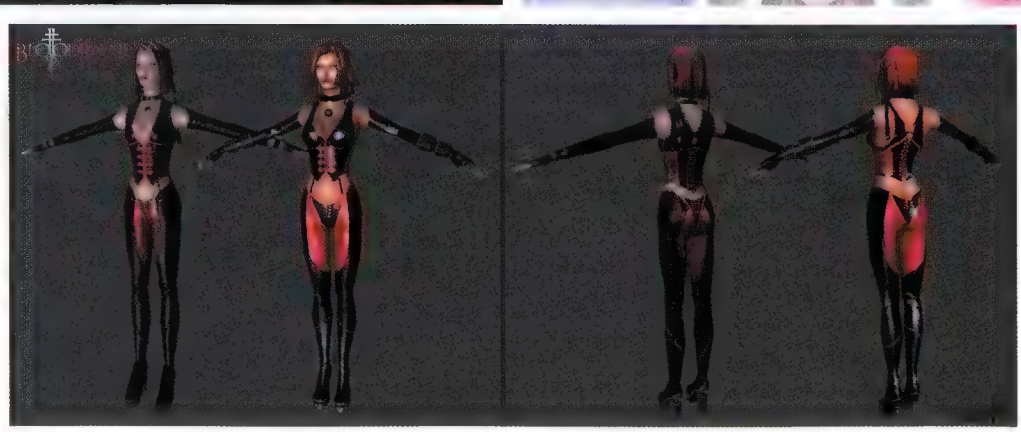
Easing the repetition (feeding in the original was cool but never evolved), there are now some 30-odd combos to unlock, along with 12 blood-spurting, faculty-removing fatalities—so killing stays fresher longer. Forget about picking up and discarding the same old guns over and over too; BloodRayne can now level-up some seriously cool vampiric weapons tech. She's now well-rounded in more ways than one.

If they can tweak the turning (the model currently pivots and has no animation or variation on turns), add quick-turn animation and better connect BloodRayne to the environments, Majesco is looking at their own little October-fest. The first sold over half a million and this game looks markedly better—great news for one of gaming's most promising new leading ladies. Let's pray that Mr. *House of the Dead* doesn't completely blow the movie. Calling Rebecca Romijn-Stamos. **Dave Halverson**

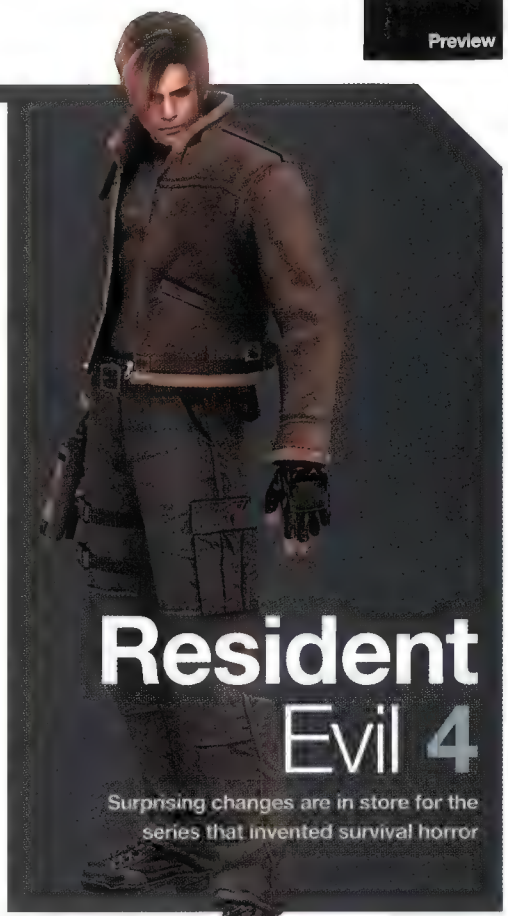
System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC
Developer: Terminal Reality
Publisher: Majesco
Available: October

"...there are now some 30-odd combos to unlock, along with 12 blood-spurting, faculty-removing fatalities..."

Looks like a full tank; must be snack time. Check the soft [illegible]



In the original, especially on Xbox where she was bump mapped, the BloodRayne model looked pretty darn good—but just look at her now. What a difference a couple of years and an engine mod makes, eh?



Resident Evil 4

Surprising changes are in store for the series that invented survival horror

The face of evil is about to change…again. Forget the shadowy Resident Evil 4 images that appeared last year at E3—Capcom has gone back to the drawing board, rethought the fundamental premises of survival horror and created an all-new experience that explores the inevitable destruction of society and significantly changes the Resident Evil formula as we know it.

"We've changed everything," says producer Hiroyuki Kobayashi "The only thing that's the same is [the] same character, Leon."

Set six years following the tragic events in Raccoon City, much has changed in the world of Resident Evil 4. In that time, the Umbrella Corporation has been reportedly destroyed, while Leon S. Kennedy, of Resident Evil 2 fame, is now a secret agent for the U.S. government. He unexpectedly finds himself thrust into this new world of terror when he is sent into Eastern Europe on special assignment to find the President's kidnapped daughter. What he finds instead is a village that has been pushed beyond the brink of madness. The populace has been affected by some disfiguring malignancy—they're not quite zombies, but they definitely aren't human either.

"Let's face it, zombies are a bit dense," Kobayashi notes. "These new enemies can use weapons, dodge and make strategies to try and smoke Leon out of hiding." When these faster, smarter, more aggressive foes begin tearing through walls and come at you with sickles, axes and chainsaws, you'll be begging for the flesh-hungry inhabitants of RE games past.

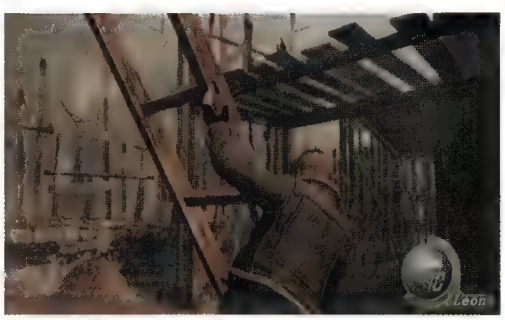
But the enemies aren't all that's changed. The focus on action is much greater this time out, especially when it comes to combat. When players push down the R trigger to ready their weapon, they now have complete control over their aim. Shoot an arm and the enemy may drop a weapon; shoot the leg and he'll hop in pain. Aim for the head and you can knock off the enemy's hat before separating his head from his shoulders. And when a hail of bullets isn't getting the job done, Leon can lob a grenade into a group of foes to end their misery.

Outside of combat, the A button now serves to fluidly control context-sensitive actions. Fence in your way? Just tap A to jump over it. Want to shatter a window to escape a room or knock down that ladder an enemy is climbing? Ditto. The result is a more interactive world with some truly exciting prospects, like a boating scene in which the player uses the action button to fire a harpoon gun at a giant aquatic monster and, if thrown overboard, to swim to safety.

While the rest of Resident Evil's oft-bemoaned control scheme hasn't changed much, the perspective has. With the camera now set to a behind-the-back viewpoint, the RE controls work much more naturally, while the unnerving feeling of not knowing what's sneaking up behind you only serves to heighten the tension. "The new camera really puts you in Leon's shoes," says Kobayashi. "It makes the controller seem like an extension of the player who then in turn feels like Leon."

Other alterations to the RE formula include the addition of several controllable vehicles, like a motorcycle and the aforementioned boat, and a change in the way puzzles are presented, although Capcom isn't saying how just yet. But other aspects of RE4 still remain a mystery. What could cause such madness in Eastern Europe? What does it have to do with the President's daughter? And will she be a playable character when you find her? As the questions mount, our excitement for Capcom's reinvention of survival horror only increases. **Chris Hoffman**

System: GameCube
Developer: Capcom Production Studio 4
Publisher: Capcom
Available: Winter 2004



Need it be said? RE4 is one of the most graphically impressive games ever.

"When these faster, smarter, more aggressive foes…come at you with sickles, axes and chainsaws, you'll be begging for the flesh-hungry inhabitants of RE games past."

Van Helsing

Devil May Hyde

To say that Saffire borrowed from Devil May Cry in the creation of Van Helsing would be an understatement. This pretty much is Devil, only in Van Helsing guise. Camera, control, double-jump, rooftop gamboling, pacing... even the pick-ups (called Glyphs for these proceedings) are the same, right down to the sound they make as you pass over them. What Van Helsing doesn't have, however, is Devil's architecture, models, finesses and—perhaps most importantly—that beautiful sky from DMC2 that entranced me like no other. Funny thing is that, taking all of that into account, it's still a seriously cool movie game. Turns out that even a poor man's Devil May Cry is a good thing, especially when it brings enough of its own and its forefathers' flavor to the table to stand on its own.

If the actual shout-out to the family Belmont in a Transylvania library doesn't get you, the grappling hook and swing mechanics applied to the Devil formula certainly will. Van Helsing is like a Capcom/Konami joint applied to a high-dollar Hollywood horror show...a gallant endeavor; if only Saffire had better modelers or an Xbox strategy of any kind. While the character designs are obviously classics, the disfigured models, riddled with sharp edges and blocky hair, leave much to be desired. The game was obviously designed for PS2 and dropped onto Xbox like a moped on a drag strip—another unfortunate defeat for Xbox users. Why companies aren't taking the time to realize each format's potential is beyond puzzling, if not a complete slap in the face. Has the bottom line become so indelible that we're all going to be forced to live with PS2 technology, regardless of what console we choose? Food for thought. Hey, at least the lighting is good...in fact, very good. Moving on, rounding out the game's Devilish dupes, Van Helsing uses a similar (okay, exactly the same) inventory and weapons system, allowing you to cash in Glyphs for various moves, health and ammo upgrades, as well as earn some seriously cool hardware, from a gas-powered crossbow to lightning, Gatling and elephant guns. Mr. Helsing's melee weapons, called Tojo blades, can also be enhanced.

Where Devil ends and Van Helsing begins (finally!) is in the boss battles and story-derived design, in league with the theme of the film, as the Vatican's monster-hunting pawn systematically hunts down legendary fiends of the silver screen on his way to every monster hunter's holy grail: the prince of darkness. Cool? Totally. This is going to be an awesome film and a good game, especially by crossover standards.

The biggest hurdle for me, as is the case with any Hollywood property, is the queasy feeling I get controlling an actor; some guy with a life that has no link whatsoever to a game I'm supposed to get lost in, doing it for either kicks, the kid(s) or because it's simply in the contract. Hugh may be cool for the movie (may be), but the in-game character needs to be more exaggerated and darkly elegant—more like, say...Dante. Hugh plays a good biker version of Wolverine, but he was also in Kate & Leopold and Someone Like You and played a complete goober in Swordfish—pretty much guy-repellant. Of course, chances are, you're not as neurotic as me. If that's the case, well, Hugh beckons. I'll certainly be playing on regardless.

Dave Halverson

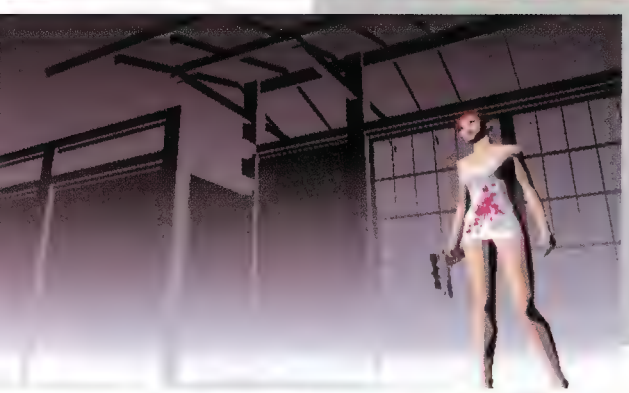
System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Saffire Corp.
Publisher: VU Games
Available: May

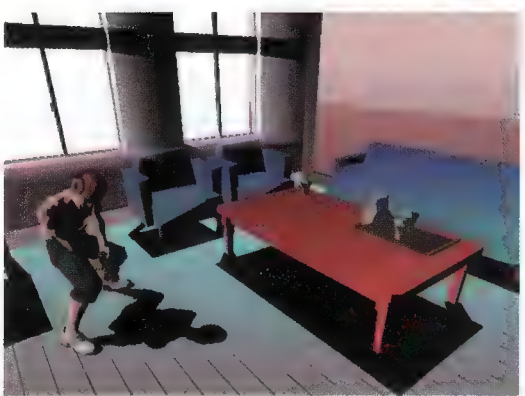
"To say that Saffire borrowed from Devil May Cry in the creation of Van Helsing would be an understatement."

"Stand still...there's a fly on your forehead."

Killer7

Is this the world through the eyes of a madman?





The surreal, trippy visuals of Killer 7 redefine video game style.

The world has erupted into chaos. Terrorists hailing from a great Eastern power have begun spreading a wave of palpable fear over the Western populace with suicidal attacks, annihilating whatever stands in their way. Marked with hideous grins, these terrorists—creatures?—known as Heaven's Smile don't attack with weapons, but actually spontaneously explode; even more frightening, they can infect other members of society, replenishing and expanding their deranged cult. Such is the world of Killer 7, a game inspired by today's headlines—a game seeped in complex story and surreal noir style.

Opposing Heaven's Smile and its crimelord leader, Kun Lan, is an unlikely protagonist: assassin Harman Smith. Though confined to a wheelchair and unassuming in appearance, within Harman live seven distinct personalities, all highly skilled, all very lethal. These personas go far beyond multiple personality disorder—Harman actually transforms into these alter egos in mind and body, and each can be killed separately from the others. With unique weapons and distinctive special abilities, each member of the "Smith Alliance" plays a specific role in the bloody tale. The personalities include Kevin Smith, master of knife techniques; Dan Smith, who possesses the ability to slow time; Coyote Smith, who has a devastating kick attack; Kaede Smith, the group's lone female, using a shower of virus-infected blood to kill her foes; Mask de Smith, armed with dual grenade launchers and possessing the ability to emit flames; Con Smith, who uses his hearing to detect enemies; and Garcian Smith, the group's leader, who can turn invisible and resurrect the other personas.

Each of Killer 7's 10 chapters of third-person exploration and first-person combat will make use of each personality's special skills, culminating with the assassination of a top member of Heaven's Smile. Each death brings Harlan one step closer to the ultimate target of Kun Lan; the journey to get there promises to be as compelling and twisted as it is distinctive in appearance.

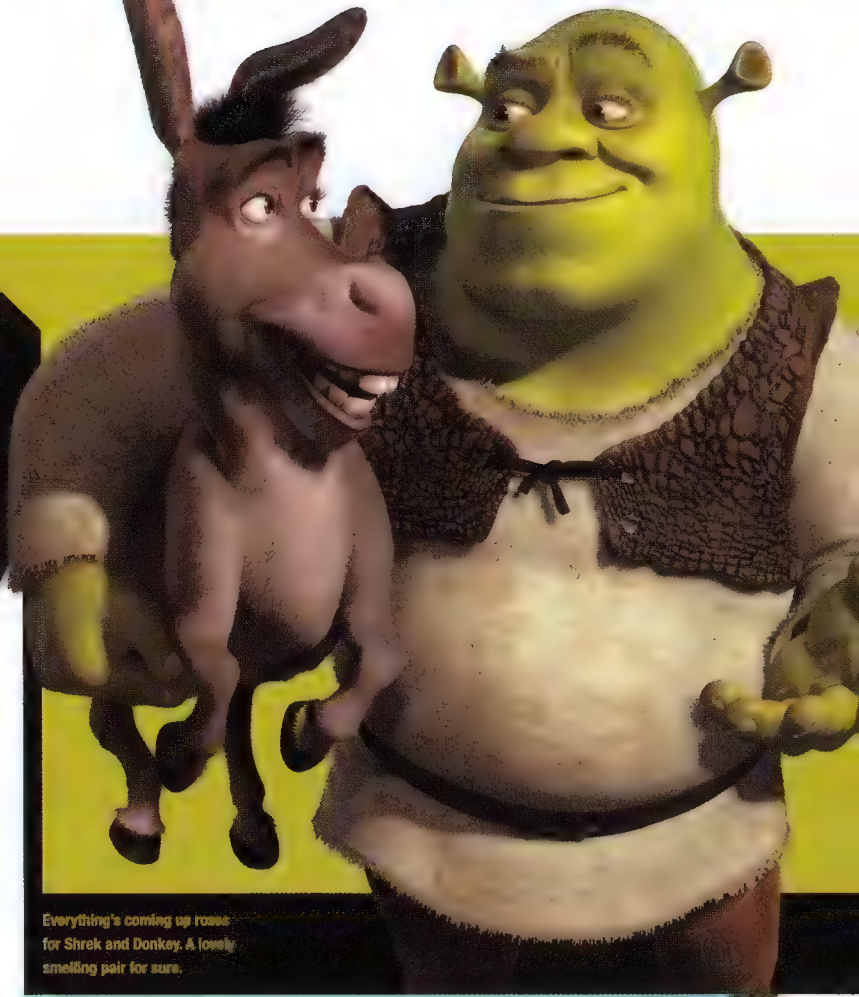
Worth noting is that while Killer 7 has recently been announced to come to PlayStation 2 in Japan and Europe, in the U.S., it remains a GameCube exclusive, though whether this is due to rejection by Sony or objections from Nintendo is unknown. **Chris Hoffman**

System: GameCube
Developer: Capcom Production Studio 4
Publisher: Capcom
Available: Winter 2004

"...the journey to get there promises to be as compelling and twisted as it is distinctive in appearance."

Shrek 2

Hey! Ogre here! It's a good Shrek game!



Everything's coming up roses for Shrek and Donkey. A lovely smelling pair for sure.

His best friend's an ass, his fine, would-be human girlfriend changed into a chunky green troll, and he's been forced to waddle around in more than a half-dozen crap games (even though one stands as the poster child for bump-mapping), but the world's favorite ogre hasn't given up the fight yet. Thanks to the talented folks at Luxoflux (Vigilante 8, True Crime), Shrek's finally starring in a game worthy of the cheeky fairytale satire that made him a bona fide mass-appeal CG superstar—cute enough for the kids and crusty enough for the rest of us. Shrek 2, the game, reminds me a lot of those great 16-bit toon-based games of old (old by gaming standards, at least) back when Traveler's Tales, Sega, Virgin and Shiny made derivatives so great they outshone the actual source material—similar to what EA has done recently for Bond and the Lord of the Rings (although lording over fairytale creatures is infinitely cooler than controlling polygonal versions of actors). Anyone who remembers the magic of Castle of Illusion, Quackshot or Aladdin knows what I'm talking about.

Shrek 2's squad-based action, filtered into the framework of the new story, is designed for one to four players, and is equally adept regardless of the combination. Playing solo, you're able to switch between four scenario-based characters, leaving the keen AI to assist you elsewhere. While playing with carbon-based life forms, individual players will be called upon to use their character's special abilities in league with the game's action-based puzzles: The Gingerbread Man (complete with reattached appendages) can toss his cookies or boomerang his cane to trigger traps; Lil' Red (who's extremely reminiscent of Baby Bonnie Hood from Darkstalkers) can throw apples to strike far-away targets; Donkey can Burro Blast otherwise immovable objects; Fiona can slow time, and so on. All of the characters—you'll meet and play with the entire main cast—are modeled with great attention to detail and a level of animation rarely seen in 3D. Lil' Red is especially fluid in motion, looking more like a wonderfully hand-animated sprite than a polygonal model. The environments are drop-dead gorgeous too, strewn with dense foliage and wondrous facades amidst pillowy soft lighting in settings as magical as their fairytale lineage. The borderline surreal appeal of the film is wonderfully translated into the game, along with superb satire: from a Fairy Godmother who's all Godfather (she can guarantee you a happy ending or make you disappear) to Jack and Jill's organic farming empire.

So the actors don't make the scene (the impressions are so good, you'd never know it); the budget for Shrek 2 obviously went somewhere better, into a happily ever after...for us. Like a fine rat-tail stew, all things Shrek seem to only be getting better with age. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2, GameCube, Xbox
Developer: Luxoflux
Publisher: Activision
Available: May

"Shrek's finally starring in a game worthy of the cheeky fairytale satire that made him a bona fide mass-appeal CG superstar..."

Way of the Samurai 2

A compelling new way to "choose your own adventure"

"One of the more interesting aspects...is the way every conversation, every action, has a cause and effect."

A sequel to an obscure game few have even heard of is kind of refreshing. A game far removed from the masses is doubly refreshing. Add in emotionally torn samurai, primitive Japanese island villages and bloody death by the sword, and you've got Way of the Samurai 2. Call it an action-RPG choose-your-own-adventure.

As Way of the Samurai 2 opens, we are introduced to our first central figure—practically nameless and bereft of personality—a wandering samurai who've drifted to a small Japanese community existing near the end of the Edo period of feudal Japan. Hungry and lonely, you meet a mute girl who offers you food. As she begins to leave, a local gang taunts her, inciting you to pull your sword for a fierce fight.

Through this good deed, you're offered a temporary place to call home. What happens next is up to you. One of the more interesting aspects of Way of the Samurai 2 is the way every conversation, every action, has a cause and effect. Some choices hold major consequence and will entirely alter your path and ending; others merely alter the reaction people have to you, which in turn may hinder your journey or make it easier: kill the blacksmith because you refuse to make a payment for his invaluable service on your sword and you may feel the heat later.

Other games, especially those in the role-playing category, have offered an array of responses to conversations, but rarely do these choices really alter an outcome or mold the personality of the characters. In Way of the Samurai 2, you have an uncommon motivation to thoughtfully ponder actions. Perhaps you will foster a more humble samurai, one who is careful to deal with people who don't take so kindly to his presence in their volatile community. Or perhaps you enjoy the rush of a more irascible warrior, relying on more aggressive responses to the unfolding events. At the very least, the idea here is full of engaging possibilities.

Events unfold throughout a 10-day period, moving from morning to noon to night as you become more deeply entwined in the conflicts of the people. Stamina must be replenished periodically, and oftentimes you may choose to pass a stretch of time simply working odd jobs for money or getting to know the area. Some events are time sensitive, setting up key linear plot points around the more open-ended adventuring.

When it's time to kick ass, the evolving technique begins with simple vertical and horizontal sword slashes, quickly building to an arsenal of more than 60 swords and 400 special moves. Blocking is a must, but attention must be paid to the structure of the sword: get too defensive and you'll permanently break your blade. Visiting shops and calling on the aid of villagers is a must to stay alive and improve your stock of equipment.

Self-contained and quite intimate in scope, the area you explore is not meant to feel grand and worldly. You are involved in the lives of an isolated community, dealing with the highs and lows of a few people working to keep the peace in their basic lives. A richly Japanese tone establishes the mood, which does rely heavily on the impact of the story flow. Way of the Samurai 2 is certainly a big break from the norm. **Brady Fiechter**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Acquire
Publisher: Capcom
Available: June

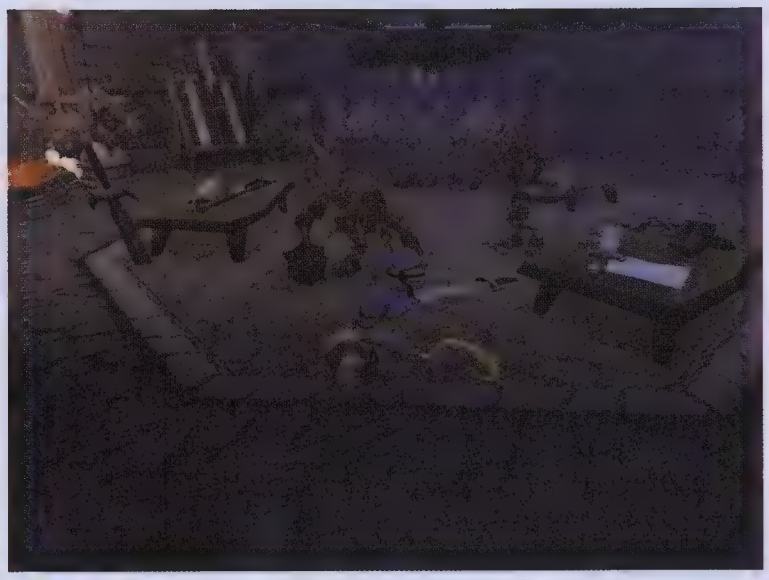
Sly 2

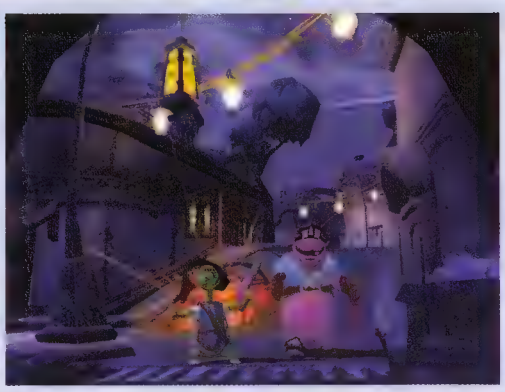
Band of Thieves

Cooler critter capers coming soon

We debuted Sly Cooper and the Thievius Raccoonus on our June 2002 cover, certain that the company responsible for the innovative Rocket: Robot on Wheels would deliver nothing short of mad skills on the PS2, which they, of course, proceeded to do. Sly didn't set the world on fire initially, but it did sell hella good, igniting passion amongst throngs of platform-savvy gamers before riding into the PS2 expanse, selling well into and throughout 2003. As great a game as Sly was (is), however, Sucker Punch did leave room for improvement. Beyond the game's buttery animation, vibrant diorama cinemas and devilishly cool Thievius-ness, the later levels seemed less tuned than the first, an overemphasis on minigames disconnected the flow, and it was on the short side. Sly 2 endeavors to build on the original's tactical best, by introducing new innovations and realistic physics into team-based thievery, and to reinvent the rest, emerging as the quintessential smooth criminal. This time out, in the vein of classic Hollywood crime capers, Sly, Bentley, Murray and all-new goon Dimitri will work as a team, pulling off a series of heists through an enhanced move set on a quest to ensure that the Cooper family nemesis, Clockwerk, remains disassembled. Using all manner of stealth and cunning, the emphasis is on pulling the player into the story like nothing before—like the critter-fan's Metal Gear Solid—through stealth, thievery, platform adventure, combat, strategy and exploration.

Where the first game was on the cheeky side, expect a much deeper and expansive story this time around, wrought with deceit, plot twists and even a romantic triangle (you can never tell with those fur-bearin' types). They get around, too...Paris, Prague, India, the Canadian wilderness and more all promise droves more expanse and exploration—another new aspect of the design. About the only thing they haven't changed is their masterful cel-shading and modeling technique, combining old-world style with





"Sly 2 looks even better than the first—reason enough to get excited for more Thievius hi-jinks of the Raccoonus kind."

storybook design for a look and feel all their own, much like Insomniac and Naughty Dog have managed with their respective creations. Sly 2 looks even better than the first—reason enough to get excited for more Thievius hi-jinks of the Raccoonus kind. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Sucker Punch
Publisher: Sony
Available: September

Above: You can now play as Murray. Let's hope it's a short level.

Jak 3

From renegade to outcast

You'd think that Jak, having dethroned the evil Baron Praxis and stopped the Metal Heads in Jak II, would be finally taking it easy, maybe settling down with Keira or Ashelin and living the good life. Unfortunately for him, that's not the case. Life in Haven City, it seems, has gone from bad to worse; some Metal Heads have survived, and warring factions—devotees of Dark Eco and devotees of Light Eco—battle for control, laying waste to the city. Jak's being blamed; the result is his banishment from Haven City into the wastelands, where the tragically fated hero is left to fend for himself (along with Daxter) in the unforgiving heat. But Jak's misfortune could be great news for PS2 owners.

Perhaps the most important item of note about Jak 3 is that the developers at Naughty Dog realize that there were problems inherent with Jak II and are striving to put things right. The sudden difficulty spikes, repetitious music, uneven balance and tedious navigation around a labyrinthine city should be things of the past. In fact, Jak won't set foot in Haven City until the second half of the game.

"The biggest change is the wasteland and the world that we're showing you outside of Haven City, which we established in Jak II," says Evan Wells, Jak 3's design director. "We wanted to expand on the universe, and we had made references to the wasteland and what was out there, and this time, in Jak 3, we're putting you out there and letting you experience it. It actually is more than just an environment; it actually speaks to the theme of the whole game and the expansion of the freedom we started providing the player in Jak II."

At four to five times the size of Haven City, the desert wasteland serves as Jak 3's vast, open, central hub, containing new characters, new missions, new modes of transportation and even its own outcast city, Spartus. "It's a much harder environment," notes Amy Hennig, game director on Jak 3. "The characters are sort of harder-edged wastelanders, and then, on top of that, there's the Marauder characters that exist out in the desert..."

For navigating this new, harsh environment, Jak has a number of options—including his trusty Jet-Board and large, ridable lizards—but for racing across the desert dunes, the all-new, ground-based, buggy-like vehicles are the only way to ride in style. While each vehicle (there will be at least five types) provides varying rates of speed and firepower, all come equipped with jump and spin maneuvers and feature realistic physics and hydraulics. And forget the "car-Jakking" from Jak II; vehicles now have to be earned.

The heart of Jak 3's gameplay once again comes by way of a wealth of varied missions. Run-and-gun action skillfully flavored with classic platforming again comprises the game's core, with objectives including search-and-destroy and rescue, while more variety is instilled through racing levels, vehicular artifact-finding expeditions and stages in which Jak will control powerful robots or other mission-specific modes of transportation.

"I think we're really trying to expand on what people

expect out of a game that was traditionally considered a platformer," Wells remarks. "I like to refer to it as a character-action game at this point—there's so many things that you're doing outside of traditional platforming. ...We don't want to rely too heavily on one type of action so that it becomes repetitive and boring."

Judging by the missions Naughty Dog have demonstrated, that doesn't look like it will be a problem. One stage mixed adept platforming (complete with rail-grinding) with the challenge of shooting at sensors to complete the path for a railway cart carrying explosive charges; another placed Jak in an ATV as he drove through subterranean caves in a mission to destroy monster nests. In yet another, Jak found himself in a forest (in which the lighting changed from night to day in pseudo-real time) where his goal was to commandeer powerful enemy cannons and use them to destroy tree parasites.

While the gameplay continues to grow, so does Jak, both in terms of his personality and his play mechanics. "He's definitely aging out; his mood is changing," says Hennig. "And that changes the game experience, because the cinematics and the narrative are such a big piece of the game. But in addition to that, we also want to make sure that we're evolving the character in terms of mechanics—that we don't strip him down to nothing and then give everything back again."

What that means is new abilities and more firepower for our long-eared hero. Not only will Jak get to use his four color-coded guns from Jak II, but they are now all upgradable into three forms each. The Scatter Gun, for example, can be modified to shoot an electricity beam and then further enhanced to fire homing shots. Jak will also be receiving expanded Dark Jak abilities—although the creators weren't saying how just yet—as well as an ethereal, winged Light Jak form, which provides techniques like gliding and health restoration. Still want more? Then check out the new mods for the Jet-Board or the new hang glider.

Another change for Jak 3 is a slight reinvention of the game's look. Explains Wells, "Just as Jak II called for things to be a little bit more grey and muted...Jak 3 is focusing on the desert look and the Precursor look, which is a sort of an orange and yellow palette." This design philosophy resulted in the look of Jak's orange Precursor armor, as well as the overall dusty feel of the environments. Too bad it didn't result in the shaving of Jak's gnarly chin nub. In addition to stylistic changes, Jak 3 also has more going on under the hood, including ragdoll physics for the enemies, new cloth technologies and enhanced memory loading that results in larger, more diverse environments.

"...the developers at Naughty Dog realize that there were problems inherent with Jak II and are striving to put things right."

As the game progresses, Jak and Daxter will find themselves back in Haven City, experiencing the evolution of a familiar gamescape and tying up loose ends about the Precursors as well as their own destinies. Although the franchise may very well continue with a completely new story arc, Jak 3, as the final chapter in the series' initial trilogy, has a lot of questions to answer and a lot of expectations to meet. So far, so good. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Naughty Dog
Publisher: Sony
Available: Fall 2004

Jak still has a penchant for gunplay but at least he got a haircut

Ratchet & Clank

Up Your Arsenal

Going Commando was awesome; this may be better

You can tell a lot about Insomniac's latest game just from its title. Obviously, this third installment in the award-winning series continues the adventures of one of video gaming's most dynamic duos: the heroic Lombax, Ratchet, and his robot partner, Clank. Additionally, the tandem will gain access to an increased arsenal, laying their hands on more firepower than ever before. Oh, and if you didn't notice, the series' wry sense of humor is still fully intact. But what the name doesn't tell you is that beyond just making the series bigger, better and funnier, Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal is attempting to go where few platform games have gone before—online. "Ratchet and Clank: Up Your Arsenal, I can say, is the most ambitious game we have ever attempted," proclaims Insomniac president Ted Price.

Insomniac's broadband-exclusive online battle plans call for eight-player simultaneous combat across no fewer than six battlefields (including some based on worlds from previous Ratchet & Clank games), featuring overlapping voice support and numerous weapons and gadgets, including missile launchers, sniper rifles, a standard Lancer-type gun and the Swingshot for crossing gaps. Players will also be able to acquire drone allies to aide them in battle, destroy environmental elements (like bridges) for strategic effect and operate co-op vehicles, such as buggies and hoverjets, where one player shoots and the other steers. Although several online modes are planned, the only one that's been revealed thus far is the strategy- and teamwork-oriented Siege Mode, in which two teams of four battle it out, with the goal being the destruction of the opposing side's base.

In addition to online play, UYA features a split-screen mode for its multiplayer carnage, although options like iLink support and CPU-controlled bots have yet to be decided; right now the mode is limited to 2-on-2 action. Insomniac also haven't

The "Path of Death" puts Ratchet's platforming skills to the test.

"...Up Your Arsenal is attempting to go where few platform games have gone before—online."

revealed what characters will be playable in multiplayer competition. In their demo, all characters appeared as small combat droids, but the creators promise a number of skins from the R&C universe in the final game.

But don't think for a second that Insomniac are letting the single-player mode fall by the wayside. Building upon the series' successes and finely tuning the platforming and strategy-heavy shooting that worked so well before, Insomniac are opting for an "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" philosophy to Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal. Just about everything that players loved about Going Commando and the original will be returning here.

"We are very proud of the fact that with both the Ratchet games, we have pushed the envelope, redefined what a platformer's all about," states co-producer Brian Hastings. "[Now] we intend to push it even further. The enemy AI has been completely redone, the revamped combat is much more intense, and the upgrade system for the weapons is much, much deeper than it was last year. The story and the voiceovers, which we've already recorded, are the funniest and the best and the best integrated with the game that we've ever done."

As in Going Commando, character and weapon growth will play a big part in the game, but whereas last time Ratchet maxed out at 80 hit points, this time he'll be able to gain more than 100. The experience system for weapons will be expanded as well. Instead of leveling up just once, weapons will now level up four times before they reach their final form.

"...Weapon upgrades were really, seriously fun," Hastings comments. "One upgrade is cool, and it was pretty satisfying when you got it. But if one is good, how about [if we] do more...?"

As weapons level up, they gain new attack powers, as well as increased ammo or features that came by way of mods in Going Commando. Take the Shock Blaster, for example. It begins as a useful but somewhat typical scattergun, then upon reaching level two gains the ability to charge up a powerful blast. Reach level three and the weapon can lock on to enemies; the Shock Blaster V4 adds an electric shock effect to the gun. Level up the final time and it transforms into the Shock Cannon, featuring a chargeable sweeping attack called the "Beam of Death" that dishes out 10 times the normal amount of damage. Additionally, new illicit weapon mods will be available.

Other new weapons and gadgets include the Infector, which makes enemies attack other enemies, the Refractor, which bends laser beams to solve puzzles and attack foes, the Plasma Whip, a melee weapon, the N60 Storm, the requisite machine gun, the Rift Inducer, which swallows enemies with black holes, and a new weapon that turns enemies into animals, though Insomniac aren't giving the details yet. (Our bet? Monkeys.)

On the receiving end of all this firepower will be a new villain by the name of Dr. Nefarious and his Tyrannoid army. Nefarious (voiced by Armin Shimerman of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* and *Buffy* fame) is out to destroy all organic life in the galaxy, and while Ratchet and Clank would like nothing better than to kick his bionic butt, they can't do it alone. To stop the doctor, they have to enlist the help of several faces from the past, specifically Captain Qwark (who has gone mad and now thinks he's a goblin tribal leader) and his Q-Force: R&C alumni Skidd McMarxx, Big Al and fitness trainer Helga (who's apparently now a master of seduction). Also assisting the heroes is Sasha—pilot extraordinaire, captain of the Starship Phoenix, daughter of the Galactic President and Ratchet's prospective love interest. (Sorry, Angela fans.)

Though none of these supporting characters are playable, Clank will once again get his chance to shine in the spotlight. In fact, when the game begins, Clank has achieved fame in his own TV show, *Secret Agent Clank*. "Clank definitely has a new thing going on," says Hastings. "...People tend to recognize him as Secret Agent Clank in a couple places throughout the story, and that plays into some of the jokes, but also, it's gonna play a little bit into the gameplay. I just can't go into the details of it right now."

Insomniac also promise bigger, more action-packed battles, with more enemies, more pyrotechnics and more strategy, along with the return of spherical worlds and mega-games like spaceship combat, resulting in a single-player experience that's even more extensive than its predecessor's. Combined with the potentially groundbreaking online play, Up Your Arsenal may not only be Insomniac's most ambitious game ever—it very well may be their best.
Chris Hoffman

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Insomniac
Publisher: Sony
Available: November

Advent Rising

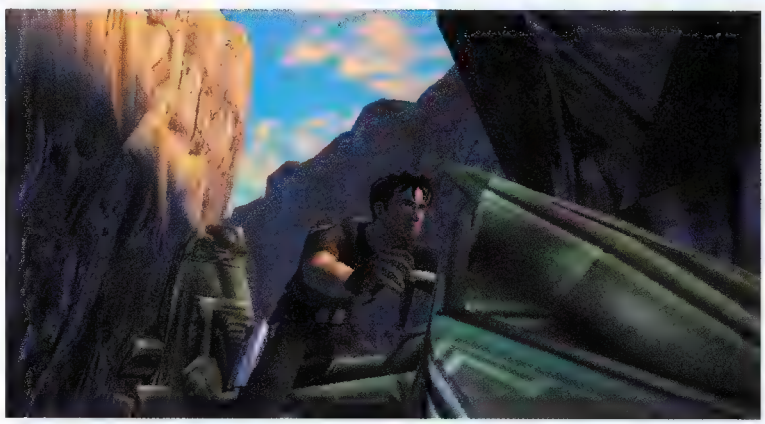
Attempting to change the way you look at sci-fi adventure

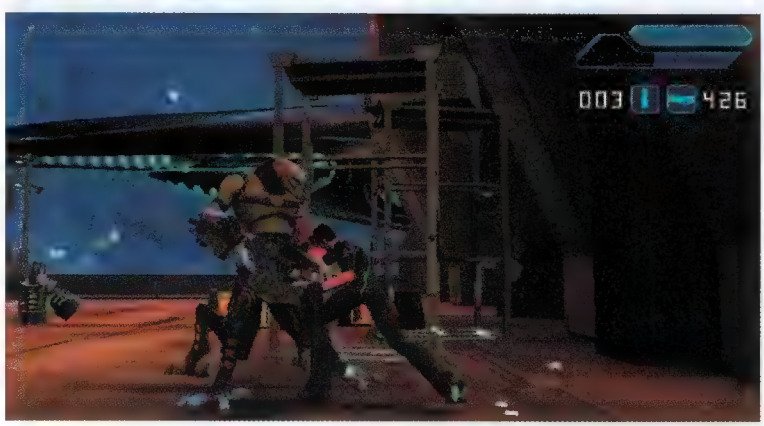
System: Xbox, PC
Developer: Glyphx Games
Publisher: Majesco
Available: September

Interview

Donald Muster, Lead Designer, Glyphx Games

by Brady Fiechter





The bigger they are, the cooler they go down.

play: Hey Donald, you made it back alive from your first big press tour! How's everything?
Donald Muster: I'm good. How's your week been?

Well, I've been swamped with a ton of games to play. I've been playing Splinter Cell like mad. You've seen the new one?
I played the PC demo for like 20 minutes. But yeah, it was pretty frickin' cool what I got to play.

Last time we were talking, you were adamant about quick play control and mechanics that don't bog you down. I know it comes down so much to taste with games. I love Splinter Cell, but I know people who will hate it, and I can understand. It did really take me a long time to get in to. It's so methodical.
I personally, would never make a game that controls like Splinter Cell. That kind of control scheme can drive me crazy. When I hit jump, I wanna jump. A lot of the moves Sam Fisher does are totally sweet. But they are sluggish and context sensitive. I don't know; someday I would like to do a stealthy, sneaker game, but I think you can do it in a way that is so much more responsive. But you know, it's definitely pretty cool, crawling through hatches and under trains, moving along. But again, it feels very much like…almost Dragon's Lair-ish.

And I wouldn't argue that. What you're doing with Advent is just a different approach. I was playing Syphon Filter, and it's pretty sluggish and mechanical at times. I picked up Serious Sam and had more fun with it at first. There is so much more to Syphon Filter, but I think there is a better way to pull it off. It seems like you're going for more responsive, quick play, where you can pick up and go and settle into the world. You really emphasize that world aspect in Advent.
Definitely. I mean, there's definitely considerations to be made when going in different directions. Pick up Splinter Cell or Prince of Persia, or something like that. Prince of Persia has beautiful animation, but what you have to kind of sacrifice for that is response time. If you look at, say, Ninja Gaiden—something that's closer to what we're trying to do—the response is instant. They took so much time where they have really strong gestures, really strong poses in their animations. But you won't have to wait anything like you would in some of these other games. I guess you still kind of have to wait a little, but there's this nice response to it. I think there are two camps forming. One, you push the button and it plays an animation, maybe opening a door or whatever. And there's the other camp where you push the button and it happens instantly. From an animation standpoint and weight standpoint, there's different things to consider. But yeah, I'm definitely into the instantaneous response category.

What makes a good game? Distill it into one general idea?
[Laughs]

Yeah, I know, kind of a loaded question.
[Laughs] That's such a loaded question!

Ok, let me ask you this. Take film as an example. You'll get the comment that film is 50 percent sound. For games, you got the argument that it's all gameplay. Some people get swept away more by the world environment. Sure you gotta have a fun game to play, but if the mechanics are merely workable, the world can take over in powerful ways. You yourself talk a lot about storytelling and the dynamic nature of the world.
Again, you can't really say. I think there has to be both. Games are such a complex medium. Look at, like, Unreal Tournament is a good example. Unreal Tournament is a multiplayer game. They shouldn't even have to worry about making a story. They make this game and say, "Oh, we wanna wrap a story around it." So they make it that there is some futuristic, wrestling-type organization where you fight to the death. And that's perfect for that type of a game. They just tacked on the story elements. And there's the other way around, if you look at something like Alone in the Dark. The whole point of the game is the story and there's really no gameplay. That's kind of weak too. You look at more games like Half-Life, or Jak and Daxter. It's about really tight, really well-conceived gameplay, but it's also about a really well-conceived narrative. And that's where it's all gonna go.

When we walked into your Advent Rising event, before you made your initial presentation, you had a duo playing classical with live instruments. You made it a point to say, hey, game music sucks. Let's not just brush on some techno music and call it a day. I think music is mostly an afterthought. At least it sounds

"With video games, there are so many devices you can use to further the emotion, further the story."

—*Donald Muster,* Lead Designer

The setting spans everything from a ship in space to the deserts of an alien-infested planet.

like it is, like it's just some lifeless noise cobbled together with the images. I think 95 percent of it is just crap. Sounds like you guys are taking steps to rely on the pull of sound.
That is one of the most critical and underused, or misused…[Donald's cell phone cuts out]…it's just such a strong narrative device that no one uses correctly. A great example of something that isn't necessarily the best music, but from an emotive standpoint, is SSX. Where the more tricks you pull off, the louder the music gets. And it starts to bring in more effects into the music, and it really makes you feel like you're a badass snowboarder.

A great example! And it's not like most games that feel like sound was just layered over the images rather than having been woven in naturally.
Which is exactly why I wanted to have a music system that would allow us to cue music in, and where the music exists like in a film. Not: here's the plant-world theme music, or whatever. You wanna be able to associate, say, the bad guys with the music. When you think of the Empire, you think of the music. The best part of *Star Wars: Episode II* was at the end of the movie when they actually played the Empire music again. You thought, "Oh, this is awesome."

Yeah, there's such emotion that can come out of just the music. Maybe I'm being too harsh, but game music just isn't close to being there.
I agree.

So back to the storytelling. You speak of this a lot, but not just good storytelling, but concise storytelling. How do you place that focus on Advent? I'm sure it's difficult. You're not necessarily just writing a great story, you're having to make a great game around a story. Bridging the two must be so challenging.
It's *really* challenging. I'll be honest here; I'm learning a lot on this game. There are a lot of things I will do differently on the sequel. We only did the voiceover maybe two and a half months ago. Next time we really want to do the voice in pre-production. Just because marrying the two things together is such a process, editing it all down. And we're always going to write too much dialogue. So it's hard… When you look at M. Night Shyamalan, he says, "You have to be able to cut your favorite scene. If you can't do that, you're not a great filmmaker." If you go to watch the extras on the DVD for *The Sixth Sense*, you see where there is a whole different scene at the end that he cut. He felt like it made the whole better. And it literally was the best scene in the whole movie. "This was my favorite scene, and I cried cutting it, but I had to."

We have so many awesome things, but I gotta keep the game concise, and some of it must go. The game right now just feels too long to me. I may need to cut a couple of hours: some of that is gameplay, some of that is dialogue that just doesn't have to be there.

That's very interesting to me. I don't often hear someone saying they're trimming. And that is, I believe, a big problem with some games right now. Empty dialogue or assaulting stretches that just wear you down to boredom for sake of length kill. And the idea of pacing doesn't seem to exist.
Exactly. And a lot of that comes from the publishing end. Well, publishers and designers alike don't want to waste time making something that's not gonna make the game. If you're going to spend the time and the money to record the dialogue, and do the cutscenes, you're damn well keeping it. And I'm going to refuse to take that approach. I'm gonna record the dialogue. Why? Because it's good dialogue. But sometimes it just doesn't fit. If it sucks, I'm gonna cut it. If it doesn't work, I'm going to cut it. I have to push constantly. People will say, "No, no, no. We spent three days animating this!" And I'm like, "I'm sorry, it just doesn't work right, and we need to edit it down." This is one reason why you do get a lot of these bloated games. Some will say if you've taken the time, keep it. I just don't agree.

It sounds obvious.
There's a reason why movies are hacked. You're never going to shoot a film exactly to the frame you need it to be. No, you have to edit. You have to be able to get just enough stuff in there to complete your work.

One thing I loved during the demo of the game, and you pointed it out, was that section where this massive chunk of hull was ripped off the ship and sucked into space outside the airlock. It's cool to look at, has nothing at all to do with gameplay. But that action around you, I think, is so paramount to bringing the world alive. Telling a visual story. This is something you guys are really aware of, huh? This is something I completely agree needs to be a focus of game design. Place action and dense events all around you.
Absolutely. Again, that's a big part of it. I don't ever want to be thought of as the guy who agrees that cutscenes are the way to tell a story. No. Telling a story is by telling a story. With video games, there are so many devices you can use to further the emotion, further the story. We're going to have a lot, a lot, a lot of things going on that aren't in cutscenes. It's what's going on around you. You're right: it's that immersion in the world. Stuff is really going on, like you're really on a space station that is being ripped apart. If I wanted to just watch a room getting destroyed, I'd watch a Rolland Emmerich film. I wanna play it while it's happening.

You and I, when we first met, we were talking over lunch about our favorite games, and we talked a lot about ICO—one of my favorite games. It was a pretty big inspiration for you guys.
ICO was a *huge* inspiration for us. I basically want Advent to be a marketable version of ICO. Of course, the game looks nothing like ICO, and we're focusing on more action and gunplay. But it's that spirit of play. Definitely ICO and Super Metroid have been our biggest influences on Advent.

Well that's certainly a good start! Two of my favorites by a long shot. But you know, looking at ICO, it just didn't sell. We love the game, but it just didn't sell. Do you keep that type of thing in mind when you're creating? Are you throwing your vision down and just hoping it goes?
No, no, no. I think about that stuff all the time. I come from a marketing background. To be truly successful and to truly change things, you need to be aware of the general state of mind of the industry. A few people can do it, but no one will ever do it perfectly. I think…I don't wanna sound cocky here, but I think I know what's cool. And I know how to market things pretty well. We're trying very hard to create characters and a design and a world and a story that have enough of the mass market appeal to grab a very wide audience, and then we can put in everything we want to do differently. There's enough stuff for the average person where they can go, "Awesome, awesome, awesome. Cool vehicles, cool weapons, great, great, great." Then you fill in the rest.

How important is budget and mainstream approach to the success of a game? You can see a $2 million film that affects you 10 times what a $100 million film might. It may show its cost, but a fine filmmaker will take it beyond the constraints.

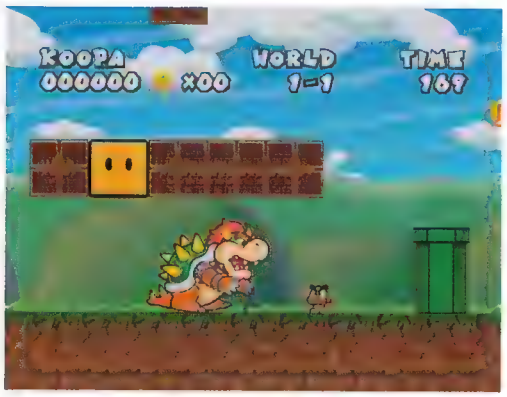
Well, you look at what Peter Jackson did, which is more along the lines of what I want to do. He had all the elements and the bullet points to have a big action movie. But that movie was just ripe, packed full of non-blockbuster Hollywood convention. It was full of emotion, of these long close-ups of the characters, sometimes tears streaming down their faces. The whole trilogy is just full of these longs scenes full of emotion and shock. Not just action and effects all the way to the end. It was so unconventional and yet was such a massive success. It tapped into everybody. *Lord of the Rings* was a character film disguised as an action film. That's brilliant.

In some ways, important elements have nothing to do with budget or team size. Does it control well, are the mechanics inventive and fun? That comes down to you as the director either knowing or not.
Well, the unfortunate thing is that I agree, but I am so amazed at how much the publisher relationship can affect the development of the game.

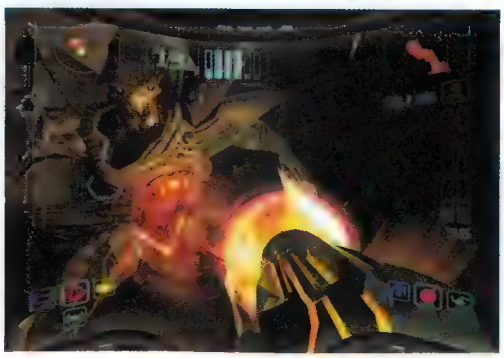
Nintendo E3 Preview

The 2004 Electronic Entertainment Expo, held May 12-14 in Los Angeles, CA, is still several weeks off as of this writing, but industry heavyweights like Nintendo are already touting several of the titles they're planning to show. Nintendo's character-driven lineup features sequels to many of their top franchises, including games that fans have been anticipating for months, if not years, as well as a couple incredible surprises. Added to the excitement surrounding the official unveiling of the new DS portable system, Nintendo is set to have one impressive E3 showing. **Chris Hoffman**

Paper Mario 2



Metroid Prime 2



Fire Emblem

The Legend of Zelda: Four Swords Adventures

Donkey Konga

Also expected...

In addition to the games featured on these pages, Nintendo is expected to show off a number of other long-awaited titles. The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker II may very well steal the show, and the Namco-developed Star Fox Armada (formerly Star Fox 2) is reportedly shaping up to be an impressive shooter in the classic Star Fox mold. Pikmin 2, now slated for August, and Geist will also make return appearances, while the GBA will gets its due in the form of the Classic NES Series, Donkey Kong Country 2 and F-Zero 2, among others. Nintendo doubtlessly has a number of other surprises in store as well.

Unreal Championship 2: The Liandri Conflict

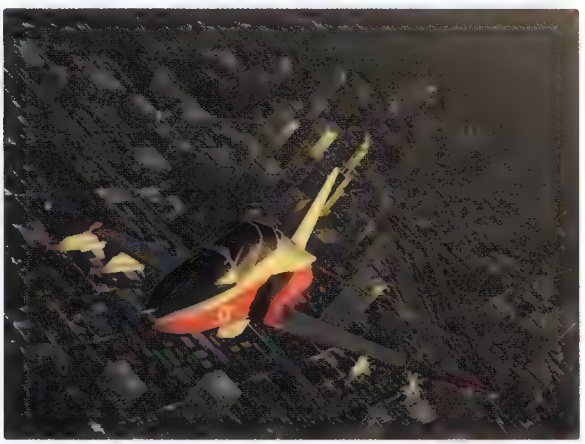
system: xbox / **developer:** epic games / **publisher:** microsoft / **available:** winter 2004

Bummed that UT 2004 is no more than a frag-fest? I know I was. But that's why God (well, close enough) created Xbox—so we could have our cake and blow the crap out of it too. The all-new game, containing 14 selectable characters from the Unreal universe, boasts not only the series' first melee combat but also a third-person camera (!), new Adrenaline Powers, new acrobatic combos, vehicles and a two-part single-player game, adding an entirely new dimension to the Unreal experience. It'll support System Link as well, on top of, of course, the Live frag-fest we all know and some love. *-DH*

Ace Combat 5: The Unsung War

system: ps2 / **developer:** namco / **publisher:** namco / **available:** fall

Unbelievable—that's really the only word to describe these beautiful images of Ace Combat 5, Namco's latest installment of gaming's premiere arcade-style flight series. Ace Combat 4 looked amazing; how Namco can raise the bar yet again is beyond us. But beyond just good looks, AC5 also features the authentically detailed fighter jets the series is known for (more than 50), along with over 30 varied missions ranging from dogfights to air-to-sea battles to recon flights. Players will also be able to use "Wingman Command" to issue orders to their squadron in the midst of a mission. *-CH*



Darkwatch: Curse of the West

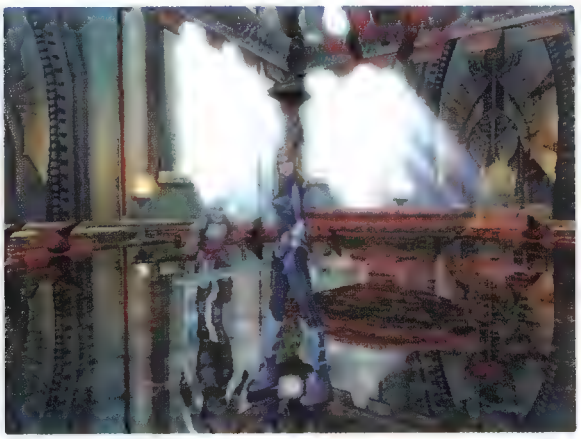
system: xbox / **developer:** sammy / **publisher:** sammy / **available:** september

Kicking off Sammy's first in-house development, Darkwatch: Curse of the West is a cool take on the they're-all-the-same FPS category. And what we have here is one strong addition to the genre. The game takes place in a fictional America of vampire horror and Western style. The typical list of weapons like shotguns, rocket launchers and rifles is enhanced by the secret society called the Darkwatch, making their force that much more destructive. With the world given an extra boost of physical presence from Havok 2, the march of death promises to be deliciously detailed, underscored by location-specific damage. *-BF*

Custom Robo

system: gamecube / **developer:** noise / **publisher:** nintendo / **available:** may

Finally, North American gamers will be able to experience what the Japanese have been enjoying since the days of the N64: Custom Robo, Nintendo's anime-inspired game of robot combat. While the gameplay consists of up to four players battling it out in explosive arena-based battles, the actual fighting is only half the experience. As its name implies, Custom Robo's hook is the ability to completely customize your 'bot, using more than 200 body parts (choosing parts for body, legs, gun, bomb and weapons pod) earned in story mode to create the ultimate mech. *-CH*



Iron Phoenix

system: xbox / **developer:** interserv / **publisher:** sammy / **available:** november

Mixing the strategy of a team-based shooter with close-and-personal melee fighting, Iron Phoenix may possess more than a few familiar qualities, but it's all being worked into a unique 16-player online structure. Single-player missions will be available, but the big deal here is what Sammy touts as a new genre for the Xbox live arena. Mythical legends of the Chinese martial arts serve as the basis for design, inspiring all sorts of weapons and acrobatics. Combat takes place in both indoor arenas and more open outdoor locations. *-BF*

Leisure Suit Larry: Manga Cum Laude

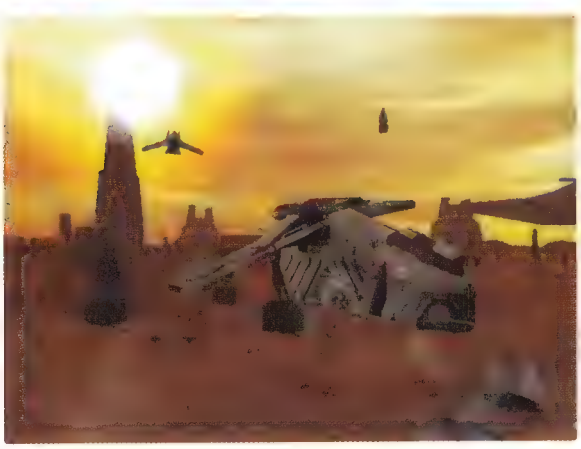
system: xbox, pc/ **developer:** high voltage / **publisher:** vu games / **available:** fall

Larry is a pathetic remnant of a bygone era who is burning for sex but doesn't have a clue how to get it. The central look at the outrageous, sexually-charged leisure Suit Larry is to get Larry what he wants—and dig on a famous dating game TV show. In this visually fun, fully explorable world your mind-numbingly mission takes you to exotic locations as a cruise-missile test house, the designers are working on implementing a web cam that sees into the neighboring sorority. Highly likely that the taboo frontal nudity will come at the end and be censored. *-BF*

Astro Boy

system: ps2 / **developer:** sonic team / **publisher:** sega / **available:** summer

Now that we've seen the PS2 version of Astro Boy up and running, we're pleased to say that the game looks absolutely remarkable—as if we'd expect anything less from the combination of Sonic Team and one of Japan's most beloved animated characters. As players proceed through the game, fighting enemies and flying through the 10 distinct environments, they'll awaken new powers within the human-like robot, such as x-ray vision (to find invisible enemies). Astro Boy's superior strength is also a major gameplay mechanic, as he picks up his massive enemies and smashes them into the destructible environments. *-CH*



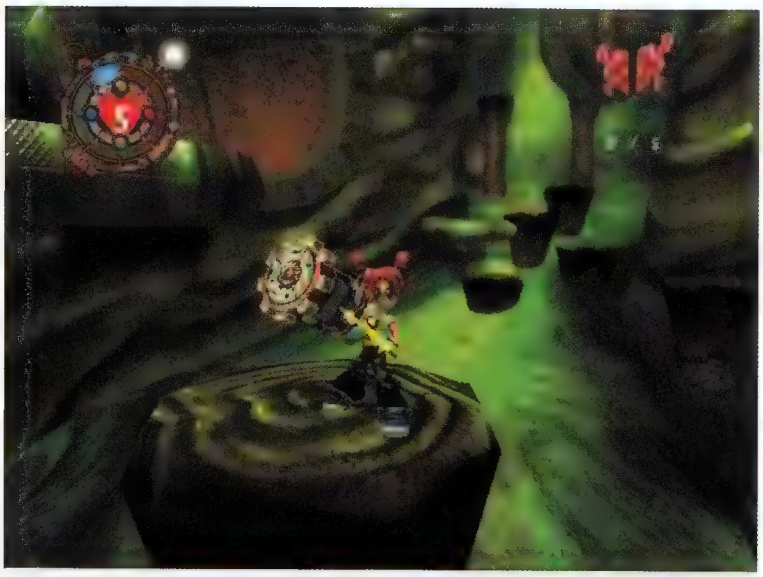
Star Wars: Battlefront

system: xbox, pc, ps2 / **developer:** pandemic / **publisher:** lucasarts / **available:** fall

Star Wars: Battlefront is a multiplayer action title combining many aspects and elements of the Star Wars series. Allowing as many as 32 players to join online in addition to the dedicated single-player experience, the game pits the action across such planets as Hoth, Endor, Naboo and Tatooine, showcasing 20 different soldier types and four factions to ring in the war. Combat is not as well as on, the game features the speeder bike, X-wing and AT-ST. Team strategy underpins the game's action, with full cooperative *-BF*

Malice

Eating crow



My long journey has finally come to an end. We did a Malice cover back in May of 2002, back when it was one of the most promising-looking, although very late, Xbox launch titles scheduled for a September '02 release from Sierra, with a PS2 version to follow... Then the weirdness began. Soon after, Sierra folded into Universal who, in all of their wisdom, figured it would be neat to get Gwen Stefani to be the voice of Malice, to which I had no quarrel, until I found out that because Gwen's fan base was largely female and/or casual gamers at best, the game would be delayed while Argonaut (famous for making challenging games) re-tooled it for mass consumption. Not such great news. As sad as that was, however, it wasn't nearly as disheartening as the way Universal abruptly dropped Malice for fiscal reasons *after* Argonaut had made the changes. Goodbye Gwen...hello obscurity. From there, I spent the last year and a half tracking the game's whereabouts, puzzled by how it could take so long for such a beautiful and promising game from a prominent developer to find a home...until finally I got my answer: Mud Duck. Not exactly Capcom. Malice had touched down at the last bastion for misfit games, so low on the food chain they don't even have PR. Only through their parent company, Bethesda, and one very tolerant contact, was I finally, after almost two years of trying, able to secure a copy of my long-lost Malice...

And then I beat it in four hours. Cue the crickets.

As expected, Malice is a drop-dead gorgeous game. If eye candy had calories, this game would make you fat. I haven't seen the PS2 version yet, but the Xbox game is coated with the best pseudo-bump-mapped textures I've ever seen and bathed in some fascinating soft light. This version, however—the one that finally emerged—is the one tuned for the control-pad challenged sector of No Doubt fans, and therefore it's hella easy. Am I disappointed? A little; but not as much as you might think. After all, most games are easy these days; I've just never played an easy, short Argonaut game. I settled in for at least 10 hours of hub-based platforming fun and got less than half, but man, is it ever a scenic tour. Midway through on my second pass, I have no doubt that Malice is still the grown-up equivalent of Willy Wonka-like childhood excess that I wanted, so it's a bittersweet connection, but a connection never the less. In fact, the game is rifer with bizarre characters and surreal places than I imagined—a dark fantasy with a pinch of satire and just the right touch of evil to wash it down nicely, made all the freakier by Malice's valley-girl demeanor. It's a fitting backdrop for the painless but inspired puzzle-action, platforming and fighting on hand as Malice infiltrates a twisted purgatory to uncover the eight special abilities and three powerful weapons she'll need to make sure history

"...a drop-dead gorgeous game. If eye candy had calories, this game would make you fat."

(especially the part where her head gets bitten off by God Dog) doesn't repeat itself. It's only through a well-timed date with Death (that reaper's not such a bad guy) that we're able to guide Malice back to that fateful meeting, and, hopefully, a more acceptable result by mowing through God Dog's menagerie of disheveled creatures for a second meeting with his supreme dog-ness; talk about dogma. It's a shame his disciples are so AI challenged, often running up to Malice defenseless for a good clubbing (or hammering or forking, depending on the level), but they certainly make for a raucous good time. They eventually brandish weapons and grow in numbers, but by then Malice is more than adequately equipped to handle their advances. The bosses follow suit—very cool, but often all too easy. Thankfully, the gamescape is generously strewn with platform and timing puzzles to balance things out, along with its unique architecture and the allure of collecting

The Crow Legions
The Crow Militia
Scrawny and disease-ridden, The Crow Militia uphold the corrupt ideals of their leader.
Their motivation is evolution, a reward for their loyalty.
But accelerated evolution comes with a high price.
Mutation, insanity and cancerous wounds are very common.
Neanderthal Crow
Fire Cannon
The Crow Guard are all equipped with weapons called Fire Cannons
Huge cumbersome weapons that spray gallons of highly flamable liquid

When mushrooms attack... No worries. It goes down easy.

all 100 heart pieces to maximize Malice's health—not that she needs it. Behind the help icon that blinks like a stuck turn signal whenever there's the slightest question of what to do next, you can see glimpses of Argonaut's original rendition, and I feel for any developer put through so much undue hell, but Malice is still something to be proud of, even in its user-friendly state. My storybook ending has Mud Duck chasing down Tork and Evil Twin next, then turning into a swan and waddling all the way to the bank.
Dave Halverson B

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox (reviewed)
Developer: Argonaut
Publisher: Mud Duck
Available: June

Final Fanasy XI Online

The epic finally comes to American PS2

I can honestly say that I have logged more hours playing Final Fantasy XI than any other game in my life. Granted, it was my first real experience with an MMORPG, but even after the novelty of this new-to-me genre wore off, I still found myself plugged into this game more often than not. Every evening and weekend became a chance for me to ignore everyone around me as I took my character to greater and greater heights in this huge world of Vana'diel. For the sake of loved ones, I have cut back of late, but the pull remains as strong as ever.

What is it about this game that has entranced me so? Well, it's a lot of things. The most obvious is that it's online. At any given time, there are thousands of players all over the world (mostly in Japan and the U.S.) connected and playing seemlessly on both PC and PS2. This sense of community, where everyone is enjoying and playing the same thing, is just fun in and of itself. When you add this to the absolutely fantastic game design and sterling graphics, there's just no turning back.

One of the best things about the design and structure of Final Fantasy XI Online is that everyone can walk their own path. Of course, there are things that need to be accomplished in order to give you certain abilites like support jobs (more on that later) and there is a story running through the game, but if you want to spend most of your time crafting items, fishing or harvesting, you can. If you want to power-level to the exclusion of all other concerns, you can. If you want to focus solely on making money, you can. How you play is up to you.

Who you play as is another great joy of the game. Initially, you have six jobs and five races to choose from. Each race has strengths and weaknesses, and unless you want a very challenging experience, you want to match the race to the job that you choose. Cute Taru Taru make excellent Mages, elegant Elvaans and hulking Galka make good Warriors, the quick Mithra make good Thieves, and the Humes are middle of the road, making them capable of doing any job, though none with distinction. Once you reach level 18, which will either take you days or weeks depending on how much you play, you can complete a quest which gives you the ability to use a support job. This allows you to run two jobs at once, giving you added skills. For instance, you can be a Thief/Warrior or a Black Mage/Red Mage. The only caveat is that the support job can only be half the level of the main job. So let's say you have a Warrior that is level 20, then your support job will be capped at level 10. When your Warrior reaches level 22, then your support job level can then be raised to level 11. Adding to the fun of all this are the extra jobs, which are accessible once your character reaches level 30. Each extra job requires a quest to unlock, and they include Ranger, Samurai, Bard, Ninja, Dark Knight, Paladin, Beastmaster, Dragoon and Summoner. Which job you choose to undertake and which race you choose to play as is one of the great pleasures in this game. I had no end of fun trying out the different jobs and races before deciding on what I wanted to be.

As with all MMORPGs, there is a lot of running (though this lessens later in the game because of added capabilities) and a lot of leveling up to do. Around level 10 or so, you want to start joining teams for this purpose, and here is where the game gets exciting. A good team will have a balance of different jobs, and provided that everyone is fairly skilled, you will be taking down incredibly tough enemies and watching the experience and items roll in. A good team will also provide you with the most exciting battles as skillchains, magic bursts and other destructive delights come together in glorious symphonies of action. But you don't always get a good team, and you can easily have a whole play experience ruined by bad playing. Such is the compromise of the human element.

It's important to note as well that joining teams isn't always about just leveling up. There are missions and quests which benefit from teams as well, and these are a lot of fun to accomplish. The rewards can be as simple as money, or as far-reaching as getting the ability to ride airships to travel to new and distant lands. And then there are the "boss" battles. Wait until you see 18 players (three allied teams of six) taking down a massive creature. It's good stuff.

Space is limited, so that's about as much detail as I can go into. Rest assured that FFXI Online is a deep, rewarding and fun online experience that everyone should try. Remember that the game costs $12.95 per month, and there is a $1.00 fee for each additional character that you create and keep. Look for me online. I am Coconuts on the Asura server. **Michael Hobbs** A

System: PlayStation 2 (reviewed), PC
Developer: Square Enix
Publisher: Sony
Available: March

Once at level 20, you can get a Chocobo license and save yourself some leg work.

"I can honestly say that I have logged more hours playing Final Fantasy XI than any other game in my life."

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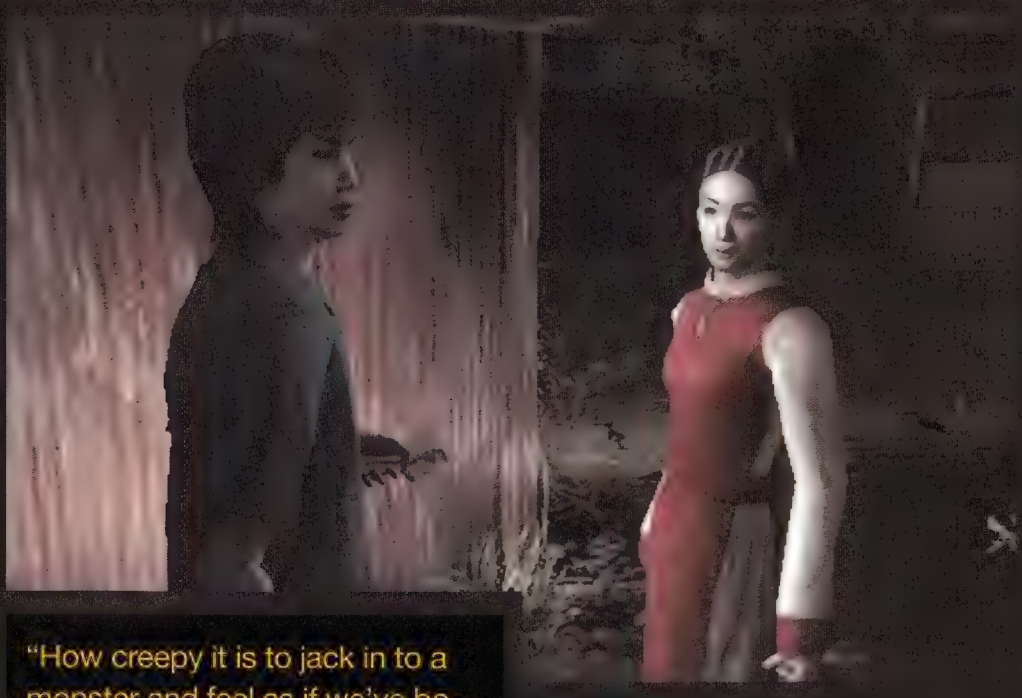
Siren

Not your usual brand of horror

A tremendous, faceless evil has invaded the quaint Japanese village of Hanuda. Blood-red rain falls from the skies, spilling into the many surrounding puddles, streams and rivers. A deafening siren pierces the suffocating fog of darkness, morbidly signaling the beginning of the end: the inhabitants have transformed into some sort of maniacal freaks of nature gone horribly wrong. Through a masterful use of subtle animation and style, their presence is chilling.

As the creepy answers to what has befallen this small village gradually, smartly reveal themselves, we find that these monsters are known as the living dead, Shibito. Most of the inhabitants have been infected, but a few mysteriously come away untouched. Our goal: escort these ten survivors to safety, one excruciatingly careful step at a time.

Stopping the monsters with a fatal blow is not an option. A few whacks with a fire poker or a couple shots from a gun—whatever feeble weapon you can find—only manages to slow them down. In no other game of Siren's type is it so necessary to distract and avoid the enemy, turning the search for survival into an unusual and sometimes frustrating reliance on an awareness of space and location. It's so difficult to see in the disturbing fog—disorientation is a huge part of the immersion—that we must literally feel our way through the buildings and city streets.



"How creepy it is to jack in to a monster and feel as if we've become the evil, watching it hack at a door with a rusty blade..."

The photorealistic faces add to the creep-factor.

There are 78 somewhat abrupt and disjointed sections of terrain to navigate, cut up amongst the playable survivors in interlocking plots and events. Pacing problems disarm the mood a bit, yet so remarkable is this creation of original horror that you forget what could have been and simply sink into the alarming sensations of the moment.

For every reliance on genre convention, Siren reaches into its own giant bag of frightening tricks. Most inventive of all—and the foundation to the game—is the sightjack power, which our survivors and, unfortunately, the enemy, possess. With this supernatural sixth sense, the mind can be transferred to another being, seeing what they're seeing. How creepy it is to jack in to a monster and feel as if we've become the evil, watching it hack at a door with a rusty blade or reload a shotgun with a slobbering grunt—or on occasion watch ourselves being slaughtered.

Seeing through the eyes of the enemy allows us to locate their position and get a sense of the area, know when they're, say, reloading or have moved away toward a shout or noise of distraction. It also further opens a gateway to disquieting spirit—a surreal connection to the world that leads to some truly disquieting moments. Note the scene where sightjacking a girl you're escorting to safety reveals that she is blind.

Most games we play are fundamentally similar. Experiencing Siren, I felt as if I were involved in something truly different. Its visual style is especially distinct: it's as if footage were taken on a Super-8 camera recovered from a vat of acid. The characters, lifelike in their realism, are not characters as much as humans in peril, caught in some nightmare projected into a reality. That they are purely Japanese and carry a British dub is a harmful decision; that there is no subtitle option to retain the original intent of the creators is unfortunate.

Siren is the vision of Keiichiro Toyama, who was responsible for the ultimately safer and more effective Silent Hill. If you liked the one, you won't necessarily like the other. Siren is not always practical in its design and, while inventive and daring, it loses its grip with questionable choices. It takes patience and tremendous dedication to learning new ways to draw on instinct for progression. Even when it's not all clicking, Siren's a rare breed of new imagination. **Brady Fiechter**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: SCEI
Publisher: Sony
Available: April

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REC

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MANHUNT

REC
SAVE

"YOU WOULD BE HARD-PRESSED TO FIND A MORE INTENSE EXPERIENCE IN ANY ENTERTAINMENT MEDIUM."
- GAME INFORMER

"TIGHT, CHALLENGING, TERRIFYING AND CINEMATIC, MANHUNT OFFERS THE STRONG OF STOMACH AN ENTERTAINING LOOK AT THE DARKEST OF ALL FORMS OF FUN"
- COMPLEX

MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Strong Language
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence

PlayStation.2

XBOX

PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE

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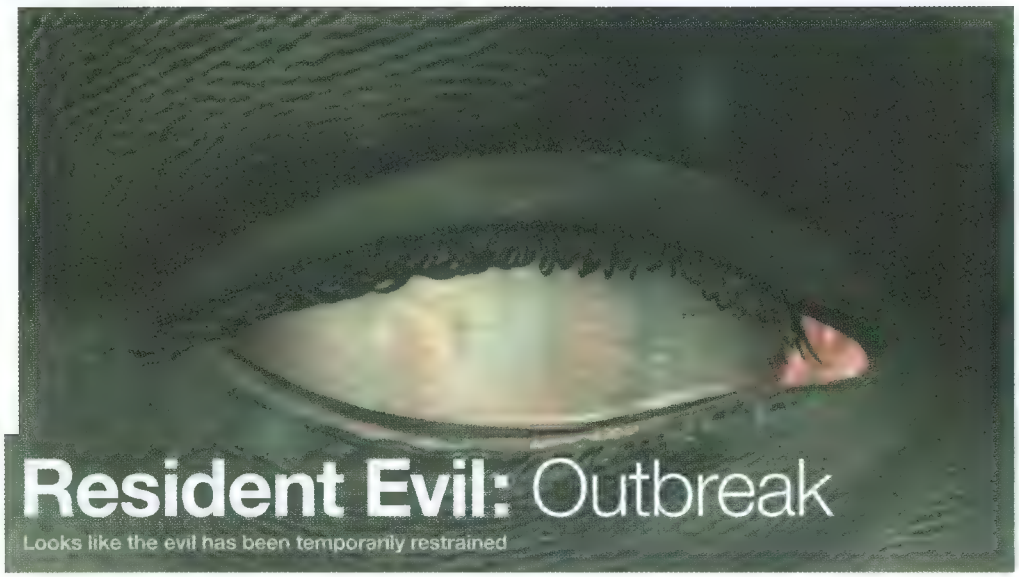
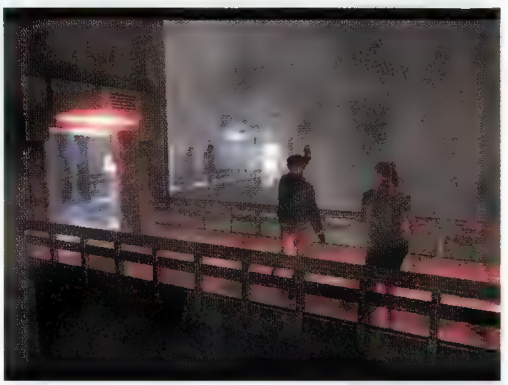


Resident Evil: Outbreak

Looks like the evil has been temporarily restrained



If I could have one game this year, it would be Resident Evil 4. Every Resident Evil before it has landed on my personal top-ten list; the original is one of my favorites in 20 years of playing video games. Call me a fan—a disappointed fan now that I've played the just merely good Resident Evil: Outbreak.

Coming off the high of possibly the finest CG introduction in the past year, elegantly embellished by a feature-film quality orchestrated score that puts most other video game music in its feeble place, the adrenaline's not about to drop as you're hurled into the chaos of a zombie-infested bar that packs all the atmosphere and incredible artistry you've come to love about this series. Fellow patrons scurry around in horror, frantically looking for a way out of the hopeless mess.

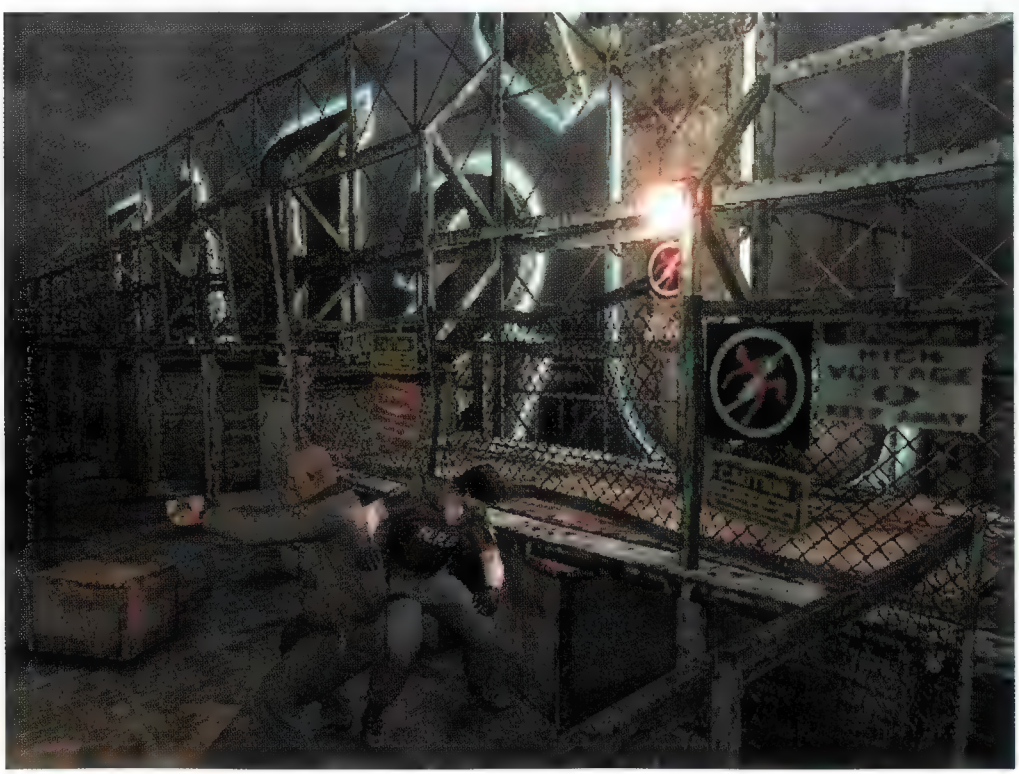
The newly improved control scheme works just fine, the setup is fun, the visual presence is never less than beyond impressive. But for all that's done well, staying fairly true to the appeal of the series, the strength of it all gradually begins to diminish as you get bogged down by a hefty line of dead gameplay weight—mechanical tasks, frustrating AI, repetitive drivel spilling from your character and your scampering buddies, protracted scenarios. And as much as I'd like to be as tolerant as I was with loading times back in the day, these enormously long pauses in the action sabotage the tension of the experience.

Outbreak is being touted as an online game, but unless you're with exactly the right people and have the patience for restrictive strategizing, it just doesn't gel as much as the single-player struggle—especially when you don't have live chat to scream out your requests. And because it's designed for online, there's no proper narrative to compliment the adventure aspects.

A lot of what you can do in this game—help the injured, trade items, interact more with the environment, use weapons in more unique ways, like boarding up doors with a nail gun—is more fantastic idea than really effective execution. There's lots of variety and exciting activity

> "A lot of what you can do in this game...is more fantastic idea than really effective execution."

The animation's not the best, but wow, do the backgrounds look good.



occurring all around, but you're never filled with a gripping urgency or sense of big accomplishment. Funny, too, how a game that was once about isolation and fear can lose so much by shifting focus to collecting and dumping in other inhabitants—the one component the designers tout as the big sell.

Resident Evil: Outbreak is a valiant effort to take the series somewhere fresh, and you have to keep in mind the infancy of the online approach to design. The game has its moments. **Brady Fiechter** **B-**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Available: March

Syphon Filter

The Omega Strain

Returning from a three-year hiatus, one of the first in the military action category is a mixed bag

Syphon Filter: The Omega Strain is perhaps the first military action game tailored more toward how I want my online experience to be. I'm tired of deathmatches, I'm tired of teams pitted against each other and, quite frankly, I'm tired of the same half-assed online experience tagged onto good single-player games for no big reason other than obligation.

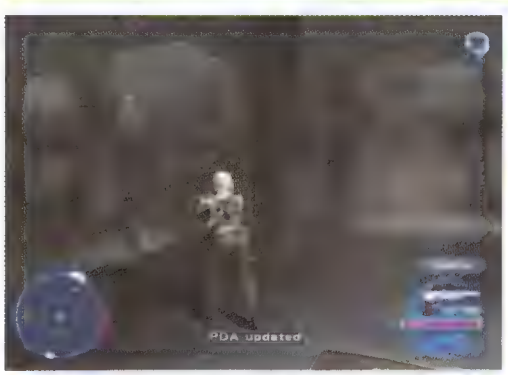
Syphon Filter does a lot right and a few things wrong, and I'm curious: would the game have succeeded on a much higher level had the focus been placed completely on either a one-player campaign or just the multiplayer? In the end, I feel like the experience was diluted for unnecessary reasons, with the game appearing to walk the fence, trying to offer a compelling foundation spread across two different modes of play.

The setup: a virus has been unleashed, and it's up to you to stop it. You travel a cool-looking world with a present-day familiarity, as a heavily armed peace-keeping killing machine taking down terrorist cells that seem to have a hell of a lot of funding and somehow keep a stockpile of thugs deep enough to fill an entire country. You know the drill: find new weapons, shoot-shoot-shoot, run up and down and all around while receiving constant mission updates on your com. Where the game begins to show its better side is online, showcasing its biggest originality as you work with partners to reach difficult areas and solve tasks in coordinated efforts. Don't think of it as chunks of arenas to play in, but rather an involving quest that must be resolved through hours of committed play.

The music is superb, the story works, the environments look good and are well designed. Outside of a convoluted map, annoying timed missions and questionable mission structures, my major faults with Syphon Filter begin with the targeting system: it feels ineffective and laborious at first, compounded by underpowered weapons before the eventual upgrades, but you do get into the groove soon enough. The control scheme just feels dated and overly encumbered, leading the action to be more about perfunctory technique than an instinctive, visceral response. There's also a few annoying byproducts from the need to incorporate a livelier inhabitance for online play. But work around the game's nagging qualities and allow yourself into its flow of play, and Syphon Filter: The Omega Strain keeps you entertained. **Brady Fiechter** **B**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Sony Bend
Publisher: Sony
Available: May

"In the end, I feel like the experience was diluted for unnecessary reasons...spread across two different modes of play."



Stepping into the heat of combat alone is not the best option. Be prepared for some nasty shootouts.

Alias

Danger girl

When it comes down to one-on-one combat, Sydney's more than game for the game.

Until recently, turning prime-time network TV properties into video games has been a pretty lame endeavor. Movie games are one thing, but TV, outside of cable and the odd reality show, is pretty embarrassing. Fortunately for its legions of followers and Hollywood game fans alike, you can file Alias under atypical, alongside the likes of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, as a rare exception to the rule, having eluded the live-action TV curse to join toon-based TV titans like Ren & Stimpy: Stimpy's Invention, The Simpsons: Road Rage, Scooby-Doo! Night of 100 Frights, SpongeBob Squarepants: Battle for Bikini Bottom and the new Samurai Jack in the justifiable TV crossover column. Not that Alias is on par with Buffy (or that live-action could ever battle the toons), but it's definitely a multimedia milestone, once you get past the fact that it's not a stealth game, but rather an action-adventure containing stealth elements.

Penned by the series' scriptwriters and with vocal performances by the actual cast, authenticity is a big part of the game's allure. Sydney, Dixon, Vaughn, Sloane, Mr. Sark, Anna, Jack Bristow and the irrepressible über-geek, Flinkman, are all brought to convincing virtual life by their TV counterparts, softening the blow as you come to grips with the game's awkward first steps—what appears to be shoddy stealth and hokey by-the-numbers gameplay. For the first hour I didn't know what to think about Alias. Was it a stealth misfire or an oddly balanced action game? With AI rarely conducive to hiding and enemies that walk twice as fast as Sydney sneaks, stealth kills were nearly impossible...when she wasn't completely outnumbered, that is. The level design versus the number of bad guys early on just doesn't compute. I found myself forced into close combat, which, considering the context of the show, seemed odd. Things do balance out, but it takes a measure of resolve to get to the good stuff. Think of me as your friendly neighborhood guinea pig.

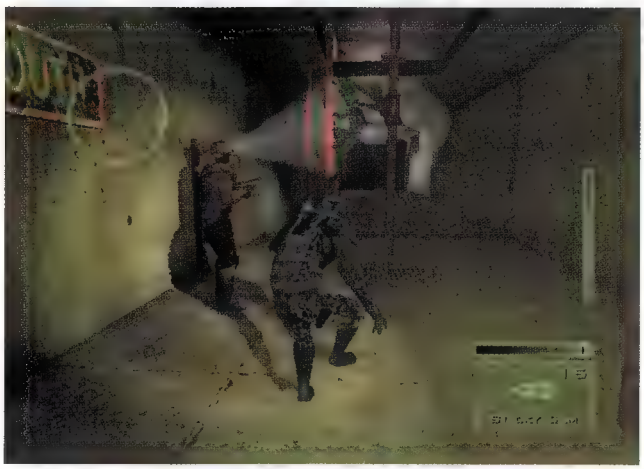
Fortunately, the combat has come a long way since I ripped the game a new one some months ago, beginning with a Sydney model that looks, acts and moves so much like Jennifer Garner (motion captured for the game), you almost feel intrusive taking her through her paces and those wonderful costume changes. Not that there's anything gratuitous about it (no jiggling here), but it's pretty much, you know…her. Routine adventuring exercises like wall-hugging, hanging, climbing and negotiating stairs all look natural (going as far as cadence changes from hop to hop), and she's primed for battle. Dodging, disarming, countering, sweeping, punching, kicking, using weapons and blocking are all synchronized in unison with her attackers, and since damage and healing happen in real time, combat's a seamless endeavor. Until the big picture comes into focus, the fighting definitely saves the day.

"Alias is a gorgeous game, painstakingly detailed and lit, and the deeper you go, the better it gets."

As the missions progress in size, scope and complexity, so does Sydney slink ever further into familiar Alias mode... picking locks, collecting DNA, hacking computers, taking out surveillance, racing against the clock, infiltrating hostile territory and, when possible, avoiding conflict by utilizing high-tech gadgets via the omnipresent and always entertaining Flinkman, along with her multiple personas and support from her CIA cohorts. As you'd expect, the story (set between episodes 19 & 20 from season two) is very well laid out, and although the cinemas are a mess, covered with crude pixelization, what they lack is more than compensated for by the exceptional in-game graphics. Alias is a gorgeous game, painstakingly detailed and lit, and the deeper you go, the better it gets. This is an extraordinary engine, easily tossing around dense ultra-detailed expanses with nary a stutter, amidst surprisingly manageable loading times (at least on Xbox). The models are mostly excellent too (complete with independently moving eyes), and each environment is skillfully pieced together with pretty much everything to scale. Nothing looks out of place, from complex museum interiors to corporate strongholds to the streets of Rio. These Cheltenham guys are good...really good. Acclaim would be well served to leave Extreme G behind and have them concentrate on adventure from now on.

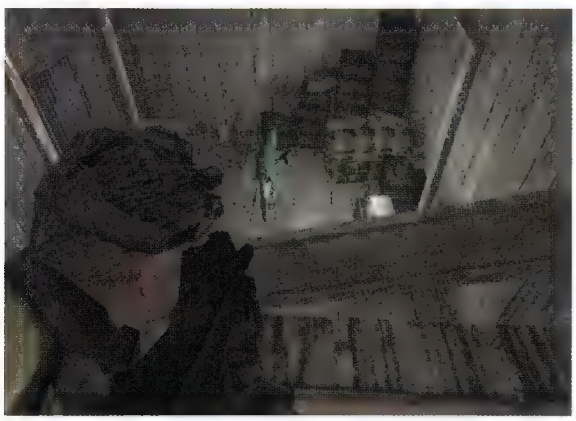
Redundant enemy speak, poor cinema quality and balance issues aside (it's also pretty easy, given save points are literally around every corner), what looked like a train wreck just a few months ago has come together as a surprisingly addictive game. How ironic that it comes from the folks that squandered The Simpsons and Mr. Hankey'd South Park, rolling out the Hershey highway instead of the red carpet (not to mention shoehorning their best game in a decade onto the PS2, negating what could have been the first great mature platformer with Vexx). Alias has begun the healing process for me. With any luck, it's a sign that one of yesteryear's most powerful third parties will be sticking around for the big show. **Dave Halverson B-**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox (reviewed), PC
Developer: Acclaim Studios Cheltenham
Publisher: Acclaim
Available: April



Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell
Pandora Tomorrow

Better than the original and packing two games in one, Pandora Tomorrow is the next level of stealth



The striking lighting is back, carving out an incredible feeling of space.

Splinter Cell was a good game with great, original ideas—a clumsily implemented stealth adventure that in the end did so much right, the heavy bumps couldn't detract from the gripping ride. Refined and smartly evolved, this uncompromising sequel goes even further with its fastidious brand of stealth gameplay, emerging as one of the most inventive, skillfully engaging games in recent memory. Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow can be extremely frustrating, relying on laborious trial-and-error progression that does not reward the impatient gamer. You have to rethink the way you play most games, assessing the scene with an uncommon restraint. The game forcefully establishes the stealthy rules within its world, demanding adherence at every step. It doesn't cheat for the sake of lazy level design and a quick, easy shot of gaming adrenaline. The developers have crafted an intricate, compelling, grandly intelligent world that feels so much like an actual place that you feel like you're working in it, not through it.

There's an interesting, complicated story propelling U.S. anti-terrorist operative Sam Fisher's motives in this globe-trotting adventure—one that carries an unusual amount of emotional implications. Force often is not necessary and even frowned upon, meaning that you may want to holster your weapon in the name of even more rewarding gameplay and, in an oh-so-rare turn, sense of moral accomplishment. It also doesn't hurt that you're going for multiple endings. Too bad the tale remains mired in mostly poor voice acting and loopy dialogue.

"You have to rethink the way you play most games, assessing the scene with an uncommon restraint."

An amazing attention to detail sets Pandora Tomorrow apart from most games we're pretending to like today simply because they're the best we've got. The deeper you crawl through the omnipresent shadows of this dusky world, the more you're consumed by the visual structure, enemy movement and overall mood of the experience. There's more than enough room for improvement, but the shakier components are left behind as everything else soars. So sophisticated is the foundation of Pandora Tomorrow's motives that you have to forgive the mistakes and revel in how involved you can be in a video game. It will only get better from here.

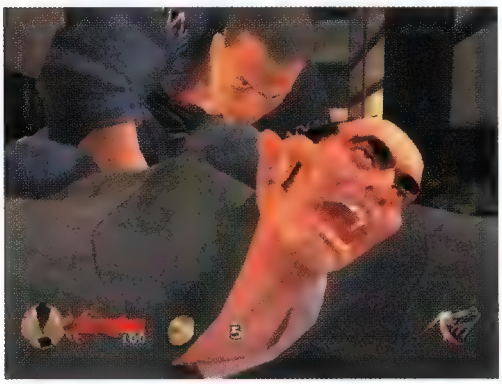
And for you online fiends, it probably already does get better in what has to be the most generous compliment yet to such a robust single-player experience. This isn't an add-on as much as a different game. Digging into the online experience can take hours, simply becoming accustomed to the deep strategy of play, which sizzles in the three modes pitting spies against mercenaries. Both sides possess varying strengths and weaknesses, and the rules are substantially shaken up from the single-player construct. The military-stealth bar is now a whole lot higher. **Brady Fiechter** **A-**

System: Xbox
Developer: Ubisoft Shanghai
Publisher: Ubisoft
Available: March

Tenchu

Return from Darkness

Wrath returns, risen anew



In case the arrow through its head doesn't do the trick, a little gift from behind...

Refitting PS2 games onto Xbox is risky business. No matter how great the game (and if it's being ported, chances are it's up there), what you're getting, for the most part, is three-year-old technology. Sure, the developer can gloss it over with added sheen, but to truly sculpt an Xbox game, you need to start from scratch. As such, few such projects are worth getting up for, especially if you already own the game on PS2. Tenchu: Return From Darkness is a rare exception. While I would have, of course, preferred that K2 rebuild the game from the ground up, adding realistic water, richer textures and perhaps some bump mapping along the way, the gloss, in this case, is still significant. It's also only the tip of the iceberg. Aside from graphical enhancements like realistic lighting and weather effects, better animation and slightly juiced models, Return From Darkness has enhanced AI, two all-new single-player levels, multiple mission paths, a new restart function (big thank you there) and significant Xbox Live content, allowing two-player team-based action over six missions, complete with online chat. Most notably, however, they've juiced the game's already masterful action, enhancing the jumping attacks, stealth moves and combos, causing any technical limitations to melt away as you get medieval to one of the best scores in all of gaming, delving ever deeper into the nimble art of slice and puncture. The brand that started it all is still the reigning king of ninja stealth.

The level design and enemy placement at work here are simply brilliant, and if the devil is in the details, Return From Darkness is evil to the core. To reap the rewards necessary to enjoy the depths of the gameplay—special moves like Ninja Vision, Feign Death, Mind Control and the single coolest ninja trick ever, Wall Camouflage—you need to rack up stealth kills, and K2 makes doing so pure guilty pleasure. This is a game built for stealth, wrought with highly gratifying blood-spurting takedowns...and after the bodies hit the floor, they stay, in all of their slumped-over or beheaded glory, like cold-blue breadcrumbs.

A couple of bones to pick: the boss battles are on the easy side and can get a bit messy collision-wise (although they're more integral to the story than the gameplay), and the English voiceover leaves much to be desired, especially if you opt for Ayame (which I always do). The vernacular and performance are unbefitting to her alluring design as one of the smoothest playing, most satisfying female characters around. Definitely hunt down the action figure.

Tenchu: Return From Darkness is about as good as conversions get; a worthwhile purchase if you liked the PS2 game enough to explore the new refinements, and a must-play for those Xbox faithful yet to experience it. **Dave Halverson B**

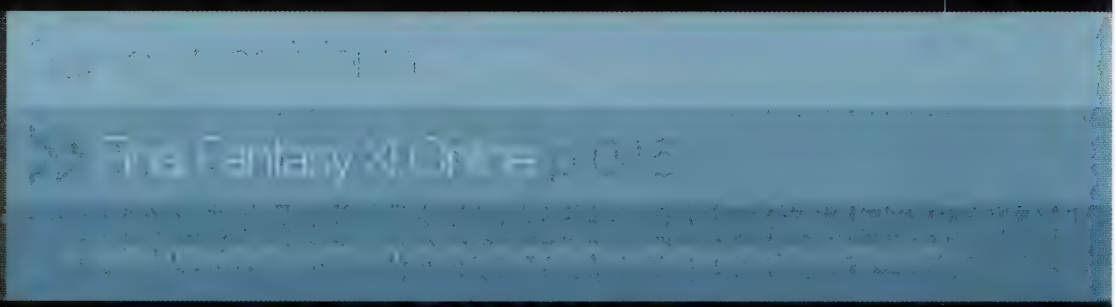
System: Xbox
Developer: K2
Publisher: Activision
Available: March

"...if the devil is in the details, Return From Darkness is evil to the core."

Reviews

Rating Scale

Excellent A
Good B
Fair C
Poor D
Worthless F



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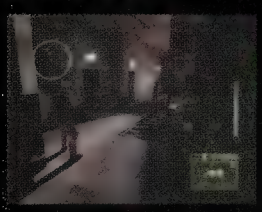

Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow
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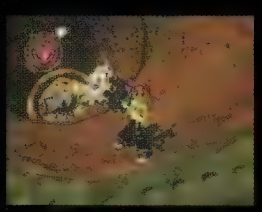
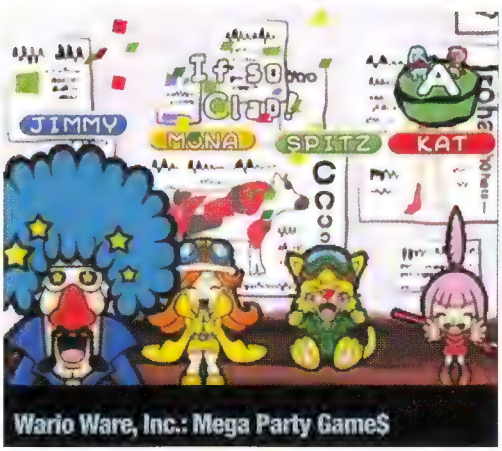
Improved over the popular original, this highly accomplished take on military stealth is one of the best games of the early year.



Malice
p 044

After floating about the gaming abyss for over a year, Malice has finally arrived. Worth the wait? You be the judge.



Wario Ware, Inc.: Mega Party Game$

Fantastically fun, insanely addictive and quirky beyond imagination, the original GBA Wario Ware was an innovative treat when it was released last year. The same can be said about the GameCube version, but it's rather disappointing how little this game has changed compared to its handheld cousin—all the minigames are identical to the GBA version, right down to the graphics and sound. The varied multiplayer competitions are certainly nice additions, but this game was really meant to be played in portable form, where the low-tech aesthetics and short-attention-span nature of its 200+ minigames are more appropriate. Wario Ware is still an absolute blast, but it seems like Nintendo squandered their opportunity to make the game even bigger and better. **Chris Hoffman B**

System: GameCube
Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo

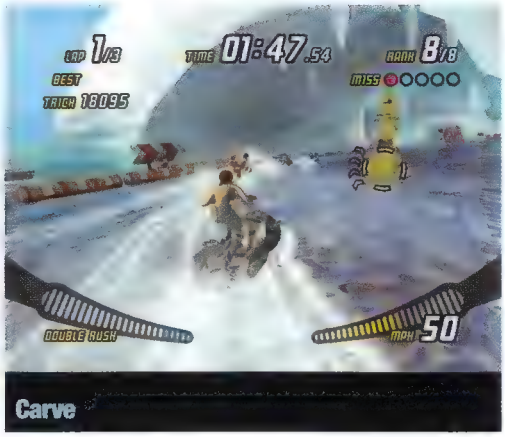
Multiplayer competition, like this variation on hot potato, add to the minigame fun.

Destruction Derby Arenas

It may not look so hot and has nothing on the original Destruction Derby released way back in the early PSOne years, but the chaotic racing of Destruction Derby Arenas sure can be addictive fun. There's just enough more here than wantonly bashing cars for points and vying for a high finish. It takes some good finesse edging a car into a barrier, flipping it around or finding just the right angle to land a hit off a jump for a big score. Points are also accrued from fancy driving and scattered pick-ups. The physics on the cars are kept too simple and there's too much of a reliance on power-ups, but go online and the energy level doubles. **Brady Fiechter B-**

Samurai Warriors

If you've killed one enemy, unfortunately, you haven't killed them all. Cloned directly from the carpal-tunnel-inducing DNA of the Dynasty Warriors series, the latest from Omega Force and Koei continues the franchise's manic button-mashing combat, with the only noteworthy change really coming in the setting shift from China to the Warring States period of Japan. If you're one of Dynasty Warriors' many fans and can't wait to continue the slaughter, you'll be absolutely in heaven here; on the other hand, if you've grown tired of the series' super-repetitive action, this will only put you to sleep. As always, the developers deserve credit for tons of on-screen foes, good aesthetics and a nice, high frame rate, but for me, the gameplay grows too stale too fast. **Chris Hoffman C+**



Carve

While Carve isn't by any means a bad jet ski racer, it's not exactly a great one either—its biggest problem being the competition. When you swim with sharks like Wave Race 64 and Blue Storm, Splashdown: Rides Gone Wild and Jet X20, you're bound to get bit. Solo, while it sports great-looking water, the characters hold little appeal, and the tricks-for-boost system, over great racing determined by a good physics-to-play-mechanics balance, just doesn't hold water. Carve's saving grace is its online, multiplayer, headset-compatible, team-based play. As the only online game of its kind, it's got that position nailed down—for now. Argonaut has a great engine and some killer H20 effects, but I'd rather see them give us Red Dog for Xbox or Malice sequel. Racing is well covered. **Dave Halverson C+**

Serious Sam: Next Encounter

Take Two just announced a $20 price tag for the fleetingly entertaining Serious Sam: The Next Encounter, confirming my suspicions that this game is too light for a full-value sell. I had a blast with it initially; it's basically a frenetic shooter that throws more enemies onscreen than any game I've played in recent memory, requiring an endless dodge-and-shoot rampage in mostly open spaces. A lack of variety hurts in the end, and while the visual style is enjoyably simple and nicely handled within its constraints, you start to want more meat on the bones. This very basic approach toward a purely visceral presentation is great, but a little more of everything across the board is needed. High praise for absolutely perfect control. **Brady Fiechter C+**

EyeToy: Groove

While the first EyeToy game was fun for everyone with its variety of easily accessible minigames, this follow-up, EyeToy: Groove only has limited appeal. Groove features merely one single-player mode (think DDR where you wave your arms instead of tap your feet), and though it's fun, it's only available for single songs—there's no tournament or arcade mode in sight. Heck, even the previous EyeToy title had two rhythm games. Multiplayer doesn't help much; though the competitive minigames are decent, the synchronized mode is pretty much unplayable. Even though the 20+ songs are all good for dancing (featuring names like Madonna, Fatboy Slim, Jamiroquai, Elvis and even the Village People), Groove only feels like a fraction of a complete game. **Chris Hoffman C+**

TOCA Race Driver 2: Ultimate Racing Sim

If it's realistic, diversified racing you're after, then Codemasters have your number. In fact, I'm quite sure that Race Driver 2 is the most in-depth racing experience ever in terms of sheer variety of classes. Like Pro Race Driver (although now completely done in CG and not quite as intrusive), RD2 is built around a realistic rags-to-riches career as you make your way around the world, participating in remarkably well-simulated events like Street Racing, Stock Car, Open Wheel Grand Prix, Truck Racing, GT Sports Car Racing, Rally, DTM, V8 Supercars, Global GT Lights, Rally Cross, Formula Ford, Classic Car Racing, and, yes, even more. I'm not crazy about jack-of-all-trades-master-of-none-type racers, but RD2 does it all so well, it's become the exception to my rule. **Dave Halverson B**

Soldiers: Heroes of World War II

Preview

Real-time strategy for action fans

Traditional RTS games once thrived in a niche market, but as the trend goes, the game industry is no longer very accommodating to the niche. Developers know that when going forth with an RTS now, even in the typically inviting PC market, you need to bring an innovative feature to the table, and ironically, when it's something incongruous that doesn't normally apply to the genre, you're probably on the right track. With Soldiers: Heroes of World War II, Codemasters and developer Best Way will be joining the glut of tactical military games based on actual wartime events and protagonists. While the basic gameplay systems are still entrenched in a traditional unit-moving RTS interface, Soldiers will deliver a completely different take on the genre by providing a unique opportunity to wreak havoc using full action controls.

The advantage of this two-tiered gameplay has an obvious impact on strategy, and levels will be designed with both large-scale combat in mind and also stealthy troop movement by using the direct-control method. Quite often, you'll find yourself starting a mission with just a handful of troops, but the environment can be used for cover to encourage tactical infiltration. The direct controls are surprisingly "twitch," allowing full movement with keys and precision aiming using the mouse, FPS style. You can shoot out tires and tank treads to immobilize vehicles, blow up ammo dumps or carefully aim for certain parts of infantry, including instant-kill headshots. Line of sight and noise detection will play an important role, as will lighting. It will be possible to shoot out streetlights on night missions to provide additional subterfuge, and during heavy storms you can use bursts of crashing thunder to your advantage, to muffle the sound of troop movement around the enemy.

While you're causing serious Rambo-style mayhem with your solo hero, you'll have full unit control of the remainder of your troops. With over 25 weapons and 100 vehicles to acquire throughout the game, strategy will involve arming and fortifying the ragged band as they move forward. Often the enemy will send out a considerable force to stop you, and while your units' abilities will allow them to position for a strong defensive stand, it's the dynamic direct control that will level the playing field as you carefully disable enemy vehicles and take out infantry. In effect, you're paving the way forward with skilled action gameplay, while working in tandem with full RTS force commands.

Soldiers: Heroes of WWII has a lot of potential. A cooperative four-player campaign mode should be a huge hit if Best Way can nail the level design for each of the Allied, Russian and German operations, while a 16-player deathmatch may be the clincher for extending the game's life long after the war is over. **Mike Griffin**

Developer: Best Way
Publisher: Codemasters
Available: Summer

Painkiller

Preview

An unholy war with godly appeal

For old-school shooter fans raised on a healthy diet of Quake gibs, this era of stealth gameplay and complex level objectives must feel like purgatory. The days of pure demon-blasting madness across menacing Gothic environments have been subdued for too long, but a revival is forthcoming. Polish developer People Can Fly is set to unleash Painkiller on PC and Xbox, and slaughtering waves of hell-spawned minions has never felt so good. We spoke with Painkiller producer Adrian Chmielarz, who shared his team's thoughts and motivations about the game's unique design, multiplayer modes and those obscenely good-looking visuals. **Mike Griffin**

Developer: People Can Fly
Publisher: DreamCatcher
Available: April

Interview

Adrian Chmielarz Painkiller Project Leader **People Can Fly**

play: What sort of background do Painkiller's level designers have? Some of the encounters and secrets are downright devious.
Adrian Chmielarz: It's a mixture of creative freedom and the fact that most games our team members worked on previously were either action-adventure or RPG-adventure. When we were making secrets, we wanted them to be something that only real fans of the game would have the heart and patience to find. I think we may have created some of the hardest secrets ever seen in a video game. It will be interesting to see how many people find all the secrets in Venice, for example. As for the "encounters," not only are we veteran gamers who still remember our first run through Wolfenstein, but we also love cinema, literature and comic books. We search for inspiration everywhere.

Tell us about Painkiller's take on "bullet time." How does it affect gameplay?
It is said that the human body moving in slow motion is a piece of beauty and grace, and I agree. It's why sport highlights look so cool and it's why John Woo uses so much slow-mo in his movies. But "Haste," as we call it in Painkiller, is not just for the aesthetics (though I must admit, it's the best way to enjoy monster animations and physics). This is a real gameplay feature, and one of the 24 cards for the Black Tarot board that you can earn.

What other kinds of powers do the tarot cards offer, and how did you balance them?
There are two kinds of cards: Silver and Golden. Silver ones have effects that stay active. For example, if you find the "Double Ammo" card and place it on the Black Tarot board, from then on, every ammo box you find will have twice the ammo within. Golden cards, however, work for a limited time—and you have to choose just the right moment to use them. "Haste" is a very good example of the Golden card: you don't waste this card on normal enemies, but when you're outnumbered and on the verge of panic, you turn "Haste" on and everyone around you starts moving in slow motion. This is a great opportunity for well-placed stakegun shots.

How did you decide on just five weapons?
In reality, we have much more than five weapons. The game's hero uses five weapons; however, every weapon consists of two modules. For example, the stakegun is combined with a grenade launcher, and the chaingun is combined with a rocket launcher. This means that in reality, the player uses 10 weapons. But there's more: every weapon has a combo. When you launch the grenade, you can stake it with your stakegun—creating another "rocket." Every combo is powerful and has lots of special effects, so we can consider these combos yet another weapon. Suddenly we're looking at 15 weapons. We also have a power-up called Weaponmod that changes the way your gun behaves. For example, under the effects of Weaponmod, your stakes light on fire and are no longer affected by gravity. We also have a "Demon Morph" mode, and Quad Damage. As you can see, "just five weapons" is an understatement, as we have provided many different means to kill your enemies.

The levels are often dramatically different in terms of sets, era and influence. Is there a common theme as you proceed through each level?
It's great that you've noticed the levels are very unique, because our goal was to avoid repetition. However, there is one thing that all these levels have in common: they could all be the nest of Hell's armies. We were looking for places that evil could easily infiltrate, hence the cemetery or catacombs. Other levels are not that obvious (like the opera house), but we tried to present them in a twisted way somehow, so it's easier to believe they are also surrounded by an evil aura.

We've seen Painkiller running on both

a high-end system and a mid-range system—both were fast and fully playable. How did the programmers achieve this?
Through scalability. There are no miracles; gamers with the latest generation of graphics cards and powerful processors will have better visuals than folks with a 1 Ghz processor on a GeForce 2. But, luckily, the game is not just about the graphics; it's primarily about having fun. This is why we kept bugging our programmers to make the game playable on as many PC configurations as possible. So no matter what PC you have (above minimum spec), you will always have the same gameplay, just with different image quality.

What advantages will the PC version have over the console Painkiller?
I believe the main advantage of PC shooters is the fact that you can control the game with a mouse and keyboard. You can have a lot of fun with shooters on console, but if you want to go "pro" (online competition, for example), a console pad just won't cut it. Another nice thing about the PC is that there's no limiting the graphics options. Maybe in two years you'll be able to turn on some new form of anti-aliasing or texture filtering we don't even know about yet and watch Painkiller in that new incarnation.

Was multiplayer Painkiller a consideration from the beginning, or did it evolve later in the project?
We wanted to have MP from the beginning, but we considered it to be an obligation with shooters. Later on, it turned out that our MP had the potential to become something very important, which was good, but it caused us many additional work hours. In the end, I think it was worth it. I hope that players who miss the good old carnage of the Quakeworld days will find something interesting in Painkiller.

Considering the packet-munching physics, what did you change in the multiplayer game to level the playing field for users with bad ping?
Even though we have an insane amount of physics in the single-player mode, it's not really needed in MP. Sure, you can have destructible walls, etc., but it doesn't add anything new or necessary to the gameplay we envisioned in PK's multiplayer. We still use physics (all player movements use the Havok engine) to create a believable gameplay environment, but not to the extent that it would melt down your cable modem.

Given the uniqueness of the PAIN engine, how difficult was it to create Painkiller's editor, for mod makers?
Some mods can be done easily, like redesigning a single-player level or new MP maps. Total conversions and such would require extensive programmer knowledge though, as the PAIN engine is definitely complicated and focuses on stuff we wanted in the game; it's not a "general use" engine. The good news is that we used LUA script language for lots of things, and people who know a little about programming know that LUA is very flexible and easy to use.

How many game servers can we expect on release day in North America?
The official servers are hosted by GameDaemons.com, and they will have 25 super-fast servers up and running, ready to go for launch. We will, of course, scale up and add more servers as needed. We also expect other server providers will host their own PK servers on launch day, or shortly after.

Will you be supporting any third-party multiplayer services such as Gamespy?
Gamespy.com is supported out of the box. We cooperated with Gamespy's team from the beginning and it's all in the game.

Finally: what do you feel is Painkiller's single, most defining characteristic?
Fun! Fun! Fun! People always compliment us on the atmosphere, the graphics and the physics or sounds (all appreciated, by they way), but the most important thing about the game is that it's pure, unbridled fun.

Many thanks to Adrian for the fantastic insight, and to People Can Fly for bringing back the old-school shooter flavor with bleeding-edge technology.

"People always compliment us on the atmosphere...but the most important thing about the game is that it's pure, unbridled fun."

-Adrian Chmielarz, Painkiller Project Leader

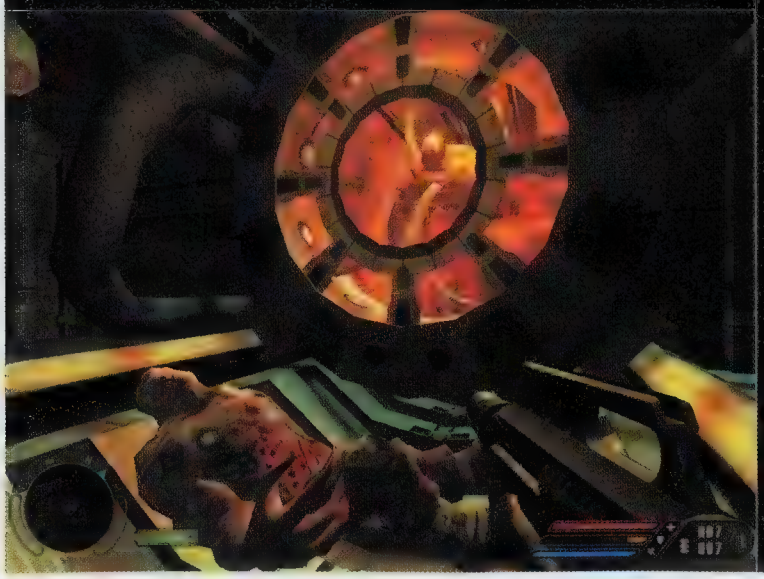
Far Cry

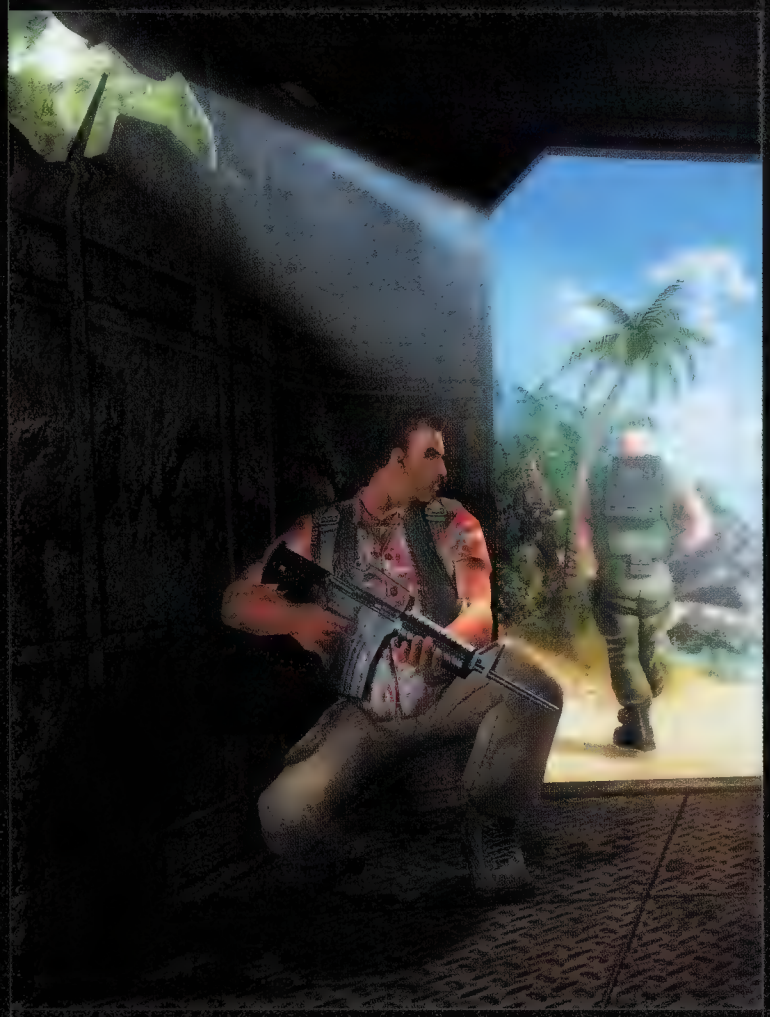
Review

Next-generation FPS thrillride

For many PC gamers, this is the year of first-person shooter evolution. Half-Life 2 and Doom 3 are set to bring a lot to the proverbial table, in terms of technical innovation and single-player campaign design. Despite a successful crossover to consoles, the genre is still firmly catering to its core PC audience: as Battlefield Vietnam and Unreal Tournament 2004 have proven so far this year, this is the platform you should be playing to enjoy the very best of online multiplayer FPS action. However, with the aforementioned big guns still in the thick of development, PC gamers now have somewhere else to go for their blockbuster shooter thrills, and it comes in the form of Far Cry—an epic, technological tour-de-force with a deep and entertaining campaign. Despite a few rough edges, it's definitely one of the best games released so far this year.

The first and most overwhelming factor that helps to propel Far Cry to greatness is the performance of the proprietary CryEngine. The game consistently looks and sounds incredible. The programmers and artists are exploiting their technology, painting environments and models with gorgeous pixel shading effects and stunning bump mapped textures. The quality and style of the lighting is extremely polished, especially in certain indoor levels where the sets are simply teeming with atmosphere: you'll witness a lattice of shadow play across the floor and crawl over surfaces from strobes overhead, sunbeams filtering into a darkened room realistically through window blinds, and a hanging spotlight might swing back and forth after contact, casting an intensely radiant cone onto walls and characters. The undulating water effect is also fantastic on the highest detail setting, swelling with a near-tangible sheen. It becomes clear early on that we won't be waiting for Doom 3 to see the power of next-generation Dx9 shaders working their magic—it's all here, right now. The engine also has a commanding ability to execute object and character physics, from barrels and gunboats to hang gliders and towering mutants, each with appropriately subtle or explosive reactions and motion. An adaptive soundtrack follows the flow of progress precisely, seamlessly crossfading from ambient exploration and intrigue to crashing danger and pounding, tribal action rhythms. And while all the intense





"It becomes clear early on that we won't be waiting for Doom 3 to see the power of next-generation Dx9 shaders working their magic..."

effects and complex visual and audio design should conspire to tax your machine, surrounded by this incredibly dense jungle vegetation and often astonishing long-range level of detail, the high performance somehow never slips on a recommended spec system.

Much like Halo, the superior AI in Far Cry adds to the experience in a very immediate gameplay sense, and also by enhancing the storyline. The dynamic behavior increases each level's replay value, because enemies will perform quite differently with each successive play, despite your best efforts to duplicate a previous run. That alone provides a unique incentive, but it's the actual movement and abilities of the enemy AI that leave the strongest impression, as they take advantage of these massive outdoor and intricate indoor levels. Krieger's hired guards use vehicles ranging from helicopters to jeeps to gunboats, and they man stationary machine gun and grenade launcher nests. On foot, the mercs use team tactics like suppressive fire to keep you pinned behind an object, while teammates carefully use cover to move around and flank. Being surrounded this way outdoors usually allows for some flexibility and repositioning, but indoors it's a whole different story. Guards will often backtrack through several rooms, even up and down stairs, to circle around behind you in coordinated fashion—and it's often a pulse-pounding ordeal to follow their distant footsteps and voices. Of course, there's no set level of AI per enemy, either. Some of the mutants have a super jump, and when they come under fire you'll see

them do stuff like back flip onto a ledge two stories up (which looks really good, incidentally) or leap right over a nearby wall. The typical human grunts don't use cover that well and usually give away their positions, while elite guards open a dodging clinic when engaged, weaving in and out of cover, always on the move, while herding you into the open with well-placed grenades. They've been given impressive routines using the same weapons you can wield, like shotguns and rocket launchers. Some of the most amazing moments in Far Cry involve massive battles between Krieger's mercenary force and the swarming outbreak of mutant trigens, which occurs midway through the campaign. Using the ubiquitous binoculars, you'll be zooming in on enemies that you've come to regard as the true badasses for their respective faction, and sure enough—they're gunning down lesser AI foes with brutal efficiency.

Far Cry is endowed with truly memorable level design from start to finish. The prevailing location theme is that of abandoned WW2-era military installations spread across and beneath several Micronesian islands, as well as Krieger's own Jurassic Park-style research facilities. The scope of certain outdoor levels is remarkable, and you're encouraged to explore every inch of the tropical environment and use vastly different routes to reach your goals. One outdoor level in particular, "Rebellion," could be one of the most satisfying FPS experiences of all time. The indoor levels usually consist of a series of keycard searches and lever switching through industrial and scientific facilities, but thankfully Crytek have steered clear of mundane task repetition by sustaining a brisk pace and constantly evolving the design of the levels as the structures (and their purpose) become more advanced, deeper into the game—and there's plenty of depth here.

Obviously, with so much goodness in its favor, the weak points of Far Cry stand out with glaring, neon-flashing clarity. While the voice work is usually adequate, and it's always interesting to hear what the mercs are discussing, most of the CG cutscenes seem to be rushed and underdeveloped affairs with stiff animation and some appalling mouth movement. It actually tarnishes the impression of high production values that the real-time portion of the game exudes, and mars an otherwise enjoyable storyline progression. And since the game controls are usually rock solid, it must be mentioned that land vehicles feel somewhat floaty and have a poorly implemented third-person camera.

Purchasing Far Cry should be an inevitable certainty for shooter fans, despite a few superficial flaws that don't really impact the outstanding core gameplay. You will also get a full multiplayer mode with massive maps and more amazing long-range combat, and for aspiring mod makers, the included CryEngine Sandbox editor is a fantastic little suite. If you generally avoid this genre until a major blockbuster comes along, it's time to make that exception for Far Cry. This could be the beginning of a very bright franchise.
Mike Griffin

Developer: Crytek
Publisher: Ubisoft
Available: March

Postscript

EverQuest adopts new engine

Following the release of the seventh expansion pack, and in the wake of the five-year anniversary of Sony's seminal online RPG, EverQuest's aging 3D engine has been updated. Officially requiring Microsoft's DirectX 9, much of EQ's core graphical code has been completely re-written, including revised skeletal-mesh character models. Various cosmetic enhancements were added, such as superior real-time weather effects and lighting, and dramatic new day-to-night sky transitions. The updated engine is surely a reaction to other bright stars on the horizon, like the visually impressive Lineage II.

ATI and NVIDIA set to evolve

According to industry sources, the second half of 2004 may see the final generation of pure-AGP solutions from graphics giants ATI and NVIDIA as the industry transitions to the faster PCI Express format. ATI's R420 and NVIDIA's NV40 chips will have the highest clockspeeds and most data pipelines seen thus far in AGP cards. They're designed as upgrades to the 9800 XT and 5950 FX series, each company's current king of the hill. Despite significantly different architectures, we can be assured of roaring performance in 2004's most demanding games from the new hardware. After the transition to PCI Express ("PCX") permeates, both companies are expected to adopt the format and introduce standalone and mixed-compatibility boards. The new format pushes over twice the bandwidth of the fastest AGP, though it's unlikely that any game will truly take advantage of the speed this year. It's coming though...

Lineage II Entices the Beta Masses

In preparation for its proposed April 28 North American release, NCsoft's much-anticipated Lineage II: The Chaotic Chronicle is currently conducting an open Beta phase. Lineage II was originally released in Korea late last year, where it has since become a mainstay of online role-playing. English players are being lured to Lineage II's vast kingdom of Aden with a special offer: all characters created during this month-long 'Prelude' Beta phase will be saved when the game goes retail, and Beta players can also receive an additional month of free service after the game's release. This offer should attract a ton of players, and after two months of dedication to their characters, many will be encouraged to sign up with NCsoft for the long haul.

Serious Sam 2 looking seriously good at GDC

Croteam was on hand at the recent Game Developers Conference with a real-time tech demo of their forthcoming Serious Sam sequel, running at the Microsoft and ATI booths. This was the first opportunity to see the game's advanced Dx9 engine in motion, and it did not disappoint. The Serious Engine 2 was offering an effortless display of all the current buzz effects in engine design, and the sweeping, tropical backgrounds were detailed and organic. Each sequence was infected with the usual Croteam humor. For their ragdoll model physics, the camera started to pan across the face of huge cliff dotted with pegs. Seconds later, a shower of unfortunate bad guys were sprinkled down from above, bouncing off the pegs on their decent like some morbid version of pachinko. It was great. According to the Croteam website, even their biggest skeptics are starting to believe that Serious Sam 2 will be visually on par with the likes of Doom 3, Half-Life 2 and Halo 2.

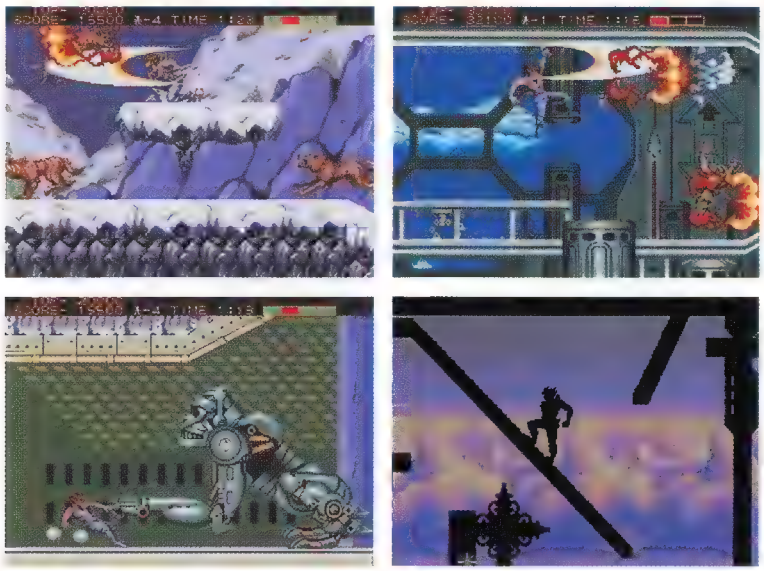
	Top Ten PC Sales (Week of March 15)
01	***MS Flight Simulator 2004: CoF*** *microsoft*
02	***Call Of Duty*** *activision*
03	***Lord of the Rings: Return Of The King*** *ea*
04	***Age Of Mythology*** *microsoft*
05	***The Sims Deluxe*** *ea*
06	***Zoo Tycoon: Complete Collection*** *microsoft*
07	***Hoyle Casino 2004*** *vu games*
08	***The Sims: Makin' Magic Expansion Pack*** *ea*
09	***Rise Of Nations*** *microsoft*
10	***Halo: Combat Evolved*** *microsoft*

RETRO

Strider (import)

One for the Sega Ages

System: Mega Drive
Developer: Capcom/Sega
Publisher: Sega
Available: 1990



In honor of this month's cover story, I thought I'd stick with the tradition of one-sitting games—in particular, one we loved so much that we memorized every inch until we could go through unscathed, and then played a hundred times more... the type of games you'll be seeing right here for many months to come. Strider caused one of the biggest feeding frenzies in the early '90s' burgeoning import game market, as U.S. gamers with filed-down cartridge holes clamored for the Japanese version, out a full eight months before the U.S. game and with authentic vocal grunts, bound for butchery by a then-clueless Sega USA. An 8-meg powerhouse fresh from the arcade—the thought that we could have this level of Capcom power at home was almost too much to bear. All these years later and still every time I pop it in and hear that first "Hahahaha!" I'm transported back in time. Strider is truly a timeless classic, especially if you're lucky enough to own the import. The color scheme, along with the revolutionary Russian-based character design and acrobatic pattern-based gameplay, is still totally magnetic, and who can ever forget moments like the bells woven into the music of the snow level, the clapping thunder, anti-gravity corridors, or the way those wild native girls mumbled in the jungle? Strider has appeared on the PlayStation since, but hasn't enjoyed the quintessential rebirth that it so wholeheartedly deserves—something to hope for in the future.

One of the first magic moments in 16-bit gaming

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles IV: Turtles in Time

Radical ninja action, dude!

System: Super Nintendo
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Available: 1992

When it comes to pure action gaming, few have ever been able to pull it off with such style and outright fun as Konami did with Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles IV: Turtles in Time. Based on the sensational arcade quarter-muncher (Konami defined the term in the late '80s and early '90s) and signifying the fearless foursome's arrival on the SNES, TMNT IV is a shining example of how to take a simple beat-'em-up premise and transform it into a transfixing game that never got old, no matter how many times you played through it. The ridiculously fun but easy-to-utilize moves, such as the throw attack that hurled enemies right into the screen (go Mode 7!), could stand as a lesson in innovation for designers of today's melee fighters, and the game even featured two new levels not found in the coin-op. Of course, it didn't hurt that the Ninja Turtles were one of the hottest licensed properties of the day. Not only were the turtles—Leo, Raph, Mike and Don—perfectly represented with their signature weapons and unique special moves, but so were their enemies (including Bebop, Rocksteady, Rat King, Krang and Shredder), all wonderfully drawn and animated in a colorful style that was true to the cartoon, supported by a rocking soundtrack. We're fortunate that the turtles are still around in games today, but TMNT IV may be the franchise's best.

One of the game's coolest moves: grab an enemy and use him as a weapon.

Crash Bandicoot Purple: Ripto's Rampage / Spyro Orange: The Cortex Conspiracy

Two platform heroes are better than one

Two of the most recognizable game heroes of recent times, Crash Bandicoot and Spyro the Dragon, are headed back to the GBA. But this isn't just another pair of typical sequels; this is a crossover the likes of which the gaming world has rarely seen, in which Spyro's and Crash's arch-enemies, Ripto and Neo Cortex respectively, have teamed up to bring misery to their do-gooding foes. Although both Crash Bandicoot Purple: Ripto's Rampage and Spyro Orange: The Cortex Conspiracy are distinct games with their own unique levels, moves and playable main character, both feature the same type of gameplay and underlying theme. In Spyro Orange, the diminutive dragon uses his flame breath and gliding abilities to traverse themed platforming stages, collect gems and battle enemies who are disguised as a certain bandicoot; likewise, in Crash Purple, Crash utilizes his trademark spin attack and double-jump to wage war against his dragon-impersonating foes while stocking up on Wumpa fruit. Each character starts his adventure in his native environment (the Dragon Castle for Spyro, the Wumpa Jungle for Crash), but their missions inevitably take them into each other's territory and against each other's nemesis.

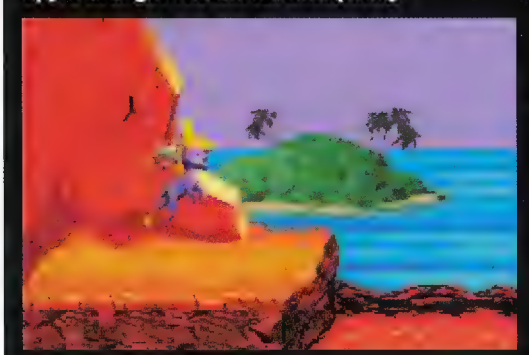
However, the main platforming-oriented stages really only serve as the hub for the games' main hook: minigames, and lots of them. To progress through each level, the heroes need to find, unlock and beat a plethora of minigames in order to proceed. These games include timed platforming stints, top-down tank-driving levels, river races, several types of shooting stages, ball-reflecting games, side-scrolling racing-type levels, button-mashing challenges and even a sheep-shooting game (a bit like Tapper). A Party Mode, in which up to four players can battle using just one game cartridge, is also included.

While playing the minigames, players can also win trading cards featuring the characters from the Crash and Spyro universes; some are just for fun, while others unlock new features, secrets or characters. Naturally, players are encouraged to link-up and trade (since each game has exclusive cards) in order to get 'em all.

The mind boggles at how cool this could have been during the heyday of these franchises, but this unique fusing of brands might be just what Crash and Spyro need these days. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Vicarious Visions
Publisher: VU Games
Available: June

Spyro Orange: The Cortex Conspiracy



Crash Bandicoot Purple: Ripto's Rampage

"...this isn't just another pair of typical sequels; this is a crossover the likes of which the gaming world has rarely seen..."

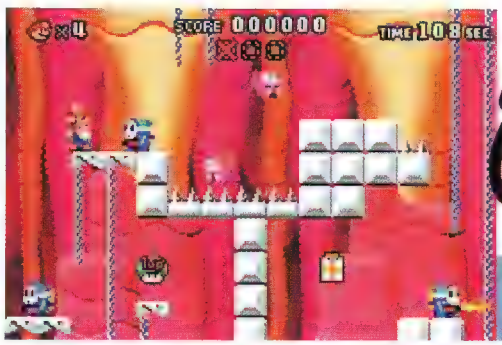
Mario vs. Donkey Kong

Preview

More than 20 years later, Mario's still monkeying around

One of the oldest rivalries in video gaming is about to be renewed. In Mario vs. Donkey Kong, the big ape is up to his mischievous ways again, and just as he was more than two decades ago, Mario's ready to stop him. There's no Pauline in sight though—this time, DK has swiped a bunch of Mini-Mario toys from Toad's shop, and Mario needs to retrieve them from the game's six main worlds. Combining puzzle solving with platform action, the core gameplay stems from the original Donkey Kong game, with Mario trying to make it to the end of relatively small stages, avoiding enemies and traps as the clock ticks down. However, everything has been expanded on exponentially: the prerendered graphics look most impressive, and a more agile Mario boasts his significantly beefed-up repertoire from Donkey Kong '94. As in that game, he can swing from bars to propel himself to new heights, perform a handstand that protects him from falling objects, utilize a handspring jump and double jump, plus he can grab and throw items and enemies a la Super Mario Bros. 2. Mario also takes a page from DK Jr. as he climbs vines and drops fruit on his enemies, and when he needs it, he can grab his trusty hammer and smash enemies into oblivion. Some stages even let Mario guide his Mini-Mario companions to solve puzzles. Mario vs. Donkey Kong has been a long time coming, but it looks to be worth the wait. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Nintendo Software Technology Corp. (NSTC
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: May

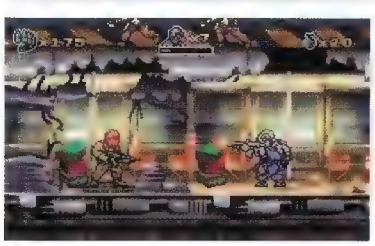


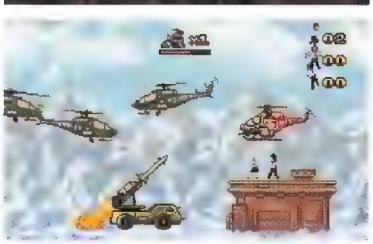
CT Special Forces 2: Back in the Trenches

Preview

Didn't play the original CT Special Forces? If that's the case, don't feel bad—Hip Games stealthily slipped their portable shooter out into enemy territory completely under the radar last year while few were looking. Fortunately for those who missed out, the sequel will be here soon, and that can only be good news for fans of hand-drawn, 2D, old-school shooting action in the vein of Metal Slug. As in SNK's classic, CT Special Forces 2 allows players to choose from several characters and then soothe their itchy trigger fingers against waves of terrorist foes. Aside from side-scrolling action (complete with drivable vehicles), the game features top-down helicopter stages, Choplifter-like rescue operations, parachuting levels and sniper action amidst the game's 20 levels. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: LSP
Publisher: Hip Games
Available: May



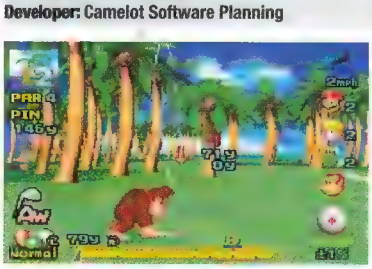


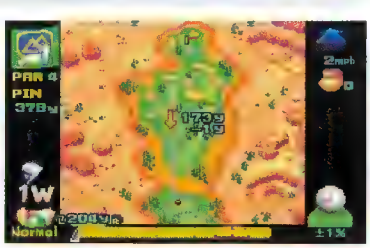
Mario Golf: Advance Tour

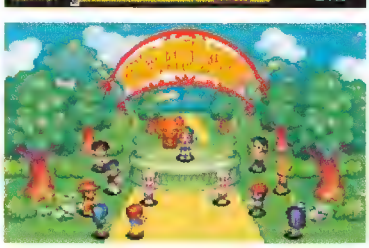
Preview

Borrowing cues from their wonderful Golden Sun series, Camelot Software Planning are taking Mario Golf down the RPG road. Similar also to their prior Game Boy Color effort, Mario Golf: Advance Tour allows players to level-up their character, enter tournaments and complete challenges on the way to the ultimate course in the Mushroom Kingdom. Of course, you can also just jump right in and play with your favorite Nintendo characters, but the RPG element adds longevity and variety. It goes without saying that however you choose to play, Camelot's typical level of quality ensures a fun and addictive experience. And for those of you who care about such things, you will be able to upload your leveled-up character to the big game (Toadstool Tour) on GameCube. **Michael Hobbs**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Camelot Software Planning
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: June







WWE Day of Reckoning

Deceit, deception, betrayal. What more do you need?

Last year's GameCube WWE offering, WrestleMania XIX, had all the tools to be a championship contender. With polished visuals, intuitive controls, a strong engine and perhaps the best Royal Rumble mode ever created in digital form, the game was only held back by its Revenge Mode, a unique but unfulfilling battle to destroy Vince McMahon's property that stood in lieu of a story mode. The sequel, WWE Day of Reckoning, looks to remedy that problem and then some.

"The number-one objective for Day of Reckoning is to deliver a unique and compelling story mode experience," says associate producer Cory Ledesma. "That is our number-one feature. We want to deliver the traditional season-like experience to the WWE user." To that end, players will be able to create a custom character—it's yet undecided if you'll be able to use established WWE superstars in story mode, but here's to hoping—and take him through the WWE ranks, starting in training camp and building up your six attributes (strength, speed, stamina, countering, submission and charisma) before earning a spot on the WWE roster.

"Unlike previous years, WWE contracts will not be handed out," Ledesma proclaims. "They'll be extremely difficult to get. You will have to prove yourself and fight against elite superstars who are better than you at this point in order to get that WWE contract."

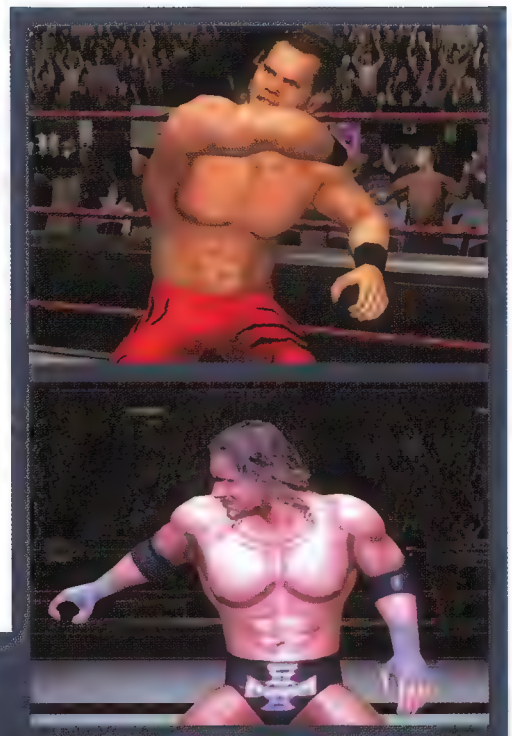
At first, your character will compete on WWE programs like Velocity and Heat, later proceeding to the bigger venues of SmackDown!, Raw and ultimately the bright lights of pay-per-views like WrestleMania.

"Once you are in the WWE, it will not be a walk in the park," explains Ledesma. "You will have to battle top superstars and factions that are trying to take you out. You will be taken through various storylines that include backstabbing, deception, betrayal—all of that good WWE wholesome fun." Sounds a lot better than throwing Vince's cronies off of construction sites.

In addition to the new story mode, a slew of other enhancements are being made, including a new submission meter (similar to that of SmackDown!: Here Comes The Pain on PS2), an updated roster featuring legend characters, new modes like the ever-popular Bra & Panties Match, more powerful foreign objects that break after a few uses, a momentum-shift feature that lets you turn the tide in a match and more emphasis on character diversity. "When the user plays the game, we want the user to feel like they're playing with these superstars and they're experiencing their strengths and weaknesses and abilities," Ledesma says. Note to THQ: if this leads to wildly unbalanced characters a la SmackDown!, this *will* come back to haunt you come review time.

The visuals have also been significantly overhauled. Even in early form, the character models appear greatly improved (further enhanced with specular highlighting), entrance animations look notably better, and the 3D crowd is a nice touch. Chris Benoit's face, which has been uncannily hard to reproduce in video games, even looks nearly perfect. Unfortunately, audio commentary is still a no-go, but in all other respects, WWE Day of Reckoning looks to be highly promising. **Chris Hoffman**

System: GameCube
Developer: Yuke's
Publisher: THQ
Available: September



"Unlike previous years, WWE contracts will not be handed out. They'll be extremely difficult to get."
– *Cory Ledesma*, associate producer

Added this year is the Bra & Panties match. Wow! Get a look at those stunning cloth physics!

THQ Superstar Challenge

photos michael tran

John Cena

When it comes to old-school gaming, John Cena knows how to represent. The man who became U.S. Champion at WrestleMania XX had this to say about his retro gaming wardrobe: "Duck Hunt, Metroid, Donkey Kong, The Legend of Zelda with the gold box—I got 'em all! I'm too young for Atari, so I grew up with the NES. I'm a huge Tecmo Super Bowl fan, I'm a huge RBI Baseball fan, Baseball Stars. I'm still playing these games right now, man, I'm still playing these games today."

The Hurricane (pictured with Trish Stratus)

Even with his professed Hurri-powers, the Hurricane couldn't prevent himself from going down in defeat to Stevie Richards in the first round. "Actually, the Hurri-powers is why I lost. Cause I spend most of my time fighting crime. Stevie spends most of his time playing games. So in the crime-fighting department, I woulda won, but in video games, that's his world, you know, so I [illegible]"

Held amidst the week of activities leading up to WrestleMania XX in New York City, the THQ Superstar Challenge pitted 16 WWE performers, including Victoria, Torrie Wilson, Billy Kidman, Trish Stratus, the Dudley Boyz and A-Train, against each other, each playing as themselves, in a battle to see who would be crowned the best WWE SmackDown! Here Comes The Pain player on the roster. John Cena (who arrived wearing a Duck Hunt t-shirt) and game fanatic Stevie Richards were considered early favorites to win, but both went down in the semi-finals. Richards was defeated by Kane, who had been decimating everyone in his way, while Cena was put down by Shelton Benjamin not once but twice after Benjamin refused to accept his first disqualification victory. "He's like The Wizard, from the OG Nintendo movie!" proclaimed Cena after his loss. In the final round, Benjamin humiliated Kane by driving him into the mat with Kane's own finisher, the choke slam, then pinned the Big Red Machine to take the tournament crown.

Chris Hoffman

Stevie Richards

"Oh, [I'm a] big gamer, huge. [But] Kane is actually a bigger gamer than me, so it's actually an honor to get beat by a guy who I actually travel and play games with. We usually play all the sports games, play all the military games, we link up on Xbox. …Mostly the Sega games are good, but EA's really coming out with some good games. I play the [illegible] Madden. I always like [illegible] above Tiger Woods 2005 and Kelly Slater [illegible] Pipeline. I think the Sega Sports [illegible] all-time favorite video games.

Rey Mysterio (pictured with Kane)

With his overpowering offense, Kane made short work of the high-flying Rey Mysterio in the first round. In what became a recurring theme of the night, the masked superstar had this to say about the character balance in the game: "No, no, that's not fair! I think Rey Mysterio should be even…he should be like at the same level as Taker, same level as Kane. You know, but my speed's there, which I gotta give it up to them. But besides that, it's all good…it's all fun."

Christian

Christian defeated Trish Stratus in the first round (then locked lips with her at WrestleMania XX three days later), but suffered an agonizing defeat against Kane in the second round. "I think that the game cheated. They only had me rated as a 69, when everybody knows if they had any brains whatsoever that Christian should be rated at least a 99 if not 100. And, you know, [Kane] just used repeated low blows, I think he had his feet on the ropes, he had a foreign object, and he paid the referee off."

NBA Ballers

Developer: Midway
Publisher: Midway
Available: April

With all the hype created by NBA Street, Midway is taking it to the rim with their latest arcade hoops title, NBA Ballers—the first-ever basketball lifestyle video game. Considering Midway's vast experience in the genre (NBA Jam), Ballers is the perfect evolution of its past lineage.

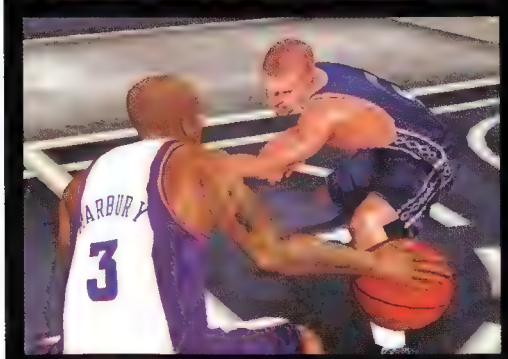
My favorite mode—Rags to Riches—is truly the shiznit. After creating a player (with the game's brilliant Create-A-Player feature) you have him work his way up through the ranks and become a true *playa*. The more time you spend in games will in turn improve your player's stats and skills. What's wickedly cool is that Ballers does it all automatically. It keeps track of your dunks, threes and steals and adjusts your player's skills accordingly. As your player starts to get recognized, that's when the bling bling starts to roll in. Phatty houses, cars, jewelry…women—if you've seen it on MTV Cribs, you're going to see it here. In addition to material items, you'll pick up special moves as well. And what's cool is that after you've completed Rags to Riches mode, you can take your Mack Daddy player and use him in all of the other gameplay modes.

But the game isn't just about Rags to Riches with Ballers; it's all about the one-on-one gameplay. The creators (including Mark Turmell, creator of NFL Blitz) have incorporated a truly unique b-ball experience. With the plethora of moves available to the player (including blocks, counters and specials), Ballers plays more like a fighting game than a basketball game. The power struggle between two players is completely over the top. With up-close fakes and last-second jukes, you truly have to earn every single point in the game. The true star of the game is control. Players turn at the drop of a hat and the shooting and dunk mechanics flow together seamlessly.

Visually, NBA Ballers is nothing short of brilliant. Using a new 36-point Facial Animation Technology, Ballers has probably the most accurately detailed players' faces in the industry. EA and Sega could definitely learn a few things from the game. True dat. Other features include DVD content (including private tours of actual NBA stars' homes and yachts), a hot hip-hop-inspired soundtrack and, of course, online gameplay on Xbox and PS2.

Bottom line: if NBA Ballers is any indication of where Midway Sports is going, it's definitely headed in the right direction. **Tom Ham** A-

"Phatty houses, cars, jewelry… women—if you've seen it on MTV Cribs, you're going to see it here."



Showdown: Legends of Wrestling

preview

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Acclaim Studios Austin
Publisher: Acclaim
Available: June

Now that we've had the chance to spend some extensive play time with Showdown: Legends of Wrestling, we're pleased to say that while Acclaim still have a few wrinkles to iron out, their third attempt to recreate the glory days of sports entertainment is headed in the right direction. In terms of characters and features, Showdown is certainly up to task. From wrestling legends like Superstar Billy Graham to '80s icons like Sting, Randy Savage and the Ultimate Warrior to stars of today like Eddie Guerrero, the roster is a virtual who's who of pro wrestling, while the robust selection of play modes—including cage matches, table matches, ironman matches, battle royals and much more—keeps the variety level high. Adding additional authenticity are actual licensed venues, like Madison Square Garden and the Pontiac Silverdome, allowing players to recreate famous matches from years gone by. And on the technical side of things, the overhauled, more realistic graphics are a vast improvement, as are the intuitive, new "ready-to-brawl" controls. A few issues still need to be worked out, however. Many moves, especially striking attacks, feel sluggish at present, and the commentary needs a lot of work. Some character faces don't look quite right either. How Acclaim addresses these issues in the months remaining before the game's release will determine whether they have a jobber or a superstar on their hands. **Chris Hoffman**

"In terms of characters and features, Showdown is certainly up to task."

Sega Ages Vol. 11: Hakuto no Ken (Last Battle)

The thrill is gone, but not forgotten

Last Battle, based on the classic *Fist of the North Star* anime and home of the 100 hand whack, was one of the very first Genesis games—out just weeks after one of the most exciting launches in gaming history. It was the first time I'd ever seen parallax scrolling in an original 16-bit home console game, and I was so completely hypnotized I just couldn't get enough. The simplest, most rudimentary gameplay imaginable—walk, punch, kick and occasionally duck or jump—and I was completely hooked. Upon learning that the import version featured exploding heads indicative of the anime (the first-ever realistic blood spurting in a video game), I saved up for a Mega Drive, and the love for import games that has driven me since was born. Fast-forward 15 years, and even with modern day (well, close enough, at least) polish, I'm sorry to say, the thrill is gone. While this is a decent homage to the original, the omission of a remixed original soundtrack spears it in the heart. The first rule of game nostalgia is to never change the music, and this time around the Ages crew blew it. Still, it's one to play through and stick on the shelf, especially if you're a Sega fan. The original 8-bit game's in here too, which is good for a laugh, if not a complete examination. We used to like this? **Dave Halverson**

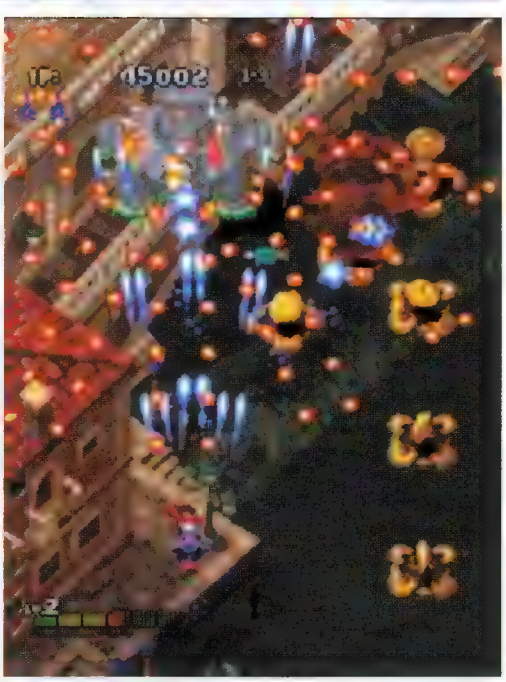
System: PlayStation 2
Developer: 3D Ages
Publisher: Sega
Available: March (Japan)

Gunbird 1&2

Top down and cute as a button

The overhead shooter, long dead to Americans, remains one of the most beloved genres in Japan, and Gunbird is certainly one of the better lighthearted series. From Psikyo, one of the most elite shooter makers in Japan, it falls under the new breed of hook-inspired vertical shooters (similar to Radiant Silvergun and Psyvariar), taking the play mechanics beyond mere shoot and dodge. The hook in Gunbird is to turn insurmountable onslaughts of enemy fire into delicious candy to do in your enemy, along with your standard POW, bomb and charge functions. The levels come in short, busy spurts, interrupted by manga-inspired visits from the bad guys, taunting you as they ready their next boss assault, and the graphics are pretty darn nice—a throwback to the great Neo Geo shooters of old. Gunbird 1 looks more like a really great SNES game; it's really all about Gunbird 2. You also have your choice of six diverse character types in GB2 (over 1's 4): Marion (the main Cotton-like character), Alucard, Tavia, Aine, Valpiro and Hei-cob. Fire at will. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Psikyo
Publisher: Atlus
Available: February (Japan)



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Birdy The Mighty
Double Trouble

Body double, double trouble

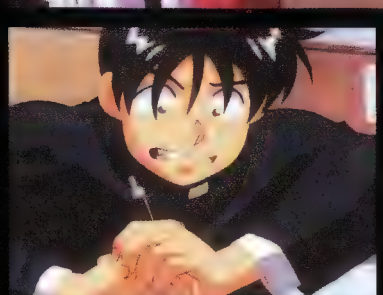
As evidenced by countless chick flicks and sleep-inducing TV news magazines, being a man trapped in a woman's body (or vice versa) is no walk in the park. So you can imagine the horror of a high school boy invaded by a curvaceous female alien warrior... Wait a minute, that doesn't sound half bad... If only it were that simple.

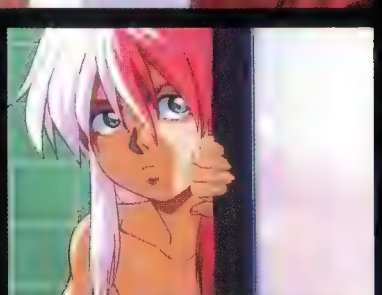
Poor Tsutomu was in the wrong place at the really wrong time—smack dab in the line of fire as Officer Birdy Xephon delivered the final blow to what she thought was an alien invader in human guise, but was actually Tsutomu. Whoops. Untimely human death not being so popular in alien-busting circles, back at headquarters (located through the door of a junked car), the proverbial doo-doo really hits the fan, and Birdy's fate is sealed... inside Tsutomu. Nothing like a little cell mass reconfiguration to start your day! Returning home to his neurotic siblings, Tsutomu's already wacky life is about to spiral to previously unfathomable depths. When aliens attack, Birdy emerges at will, using "the body" to kick some alien booty, whether Tsutomu likes it or not—which is weird, but not quite as weird as trying to maintain an ordinary home and school life with a female warrior trapped inside your body.

I like *Birdy*. It's like a tongue-in-cheek *MiB* injected with toilet humor and a comedic sense of inner struggle; you just can't help but be affected by the fact that poor Tsutomu is actually dead. It'll be interesting to see where it goes from here. **Dave Halverson**

Studio: Central Park Media
Rating: 15 & Up
Running Time: 70 Minutes
Volume: 1

"So you can imagine the horror of a high school boy invaded by a curvaceous female alien warrior... Wait a minute, that doesn't sound half bad..."





GONZO 10TH ANNIVERSARY
(CREATORS OF BLUE SUBMARINE NO. 6 AND HELLSING)
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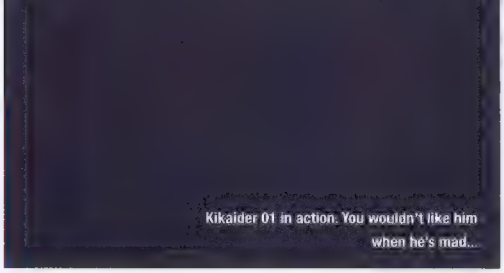
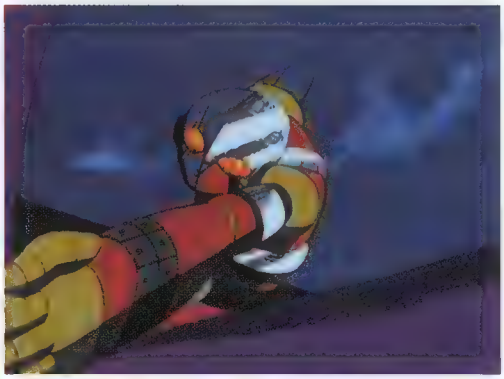


Kikaider 01 in action. You wouldn't like him when he's mad...



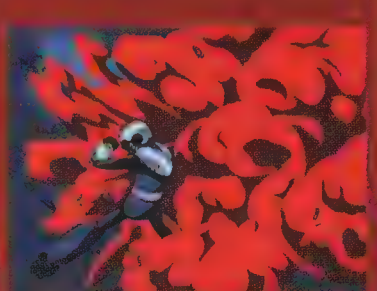
Kikaider 01

It's not over 'til the Armageddon weapon sings

Jiro may have defeated DARK, but that only gave rise to SHADOW, an evil robo-army that makes DARK look, well, light. If you're not familiar with the plight of Jiro, you have no idea what the hell I'm talking about, so a brief history lesson: Jiro's a Kikaider android created by the dearly departed Professor Komyoji. Jiro was his Pinocchio—an android with a human heart called the Gemini Drive—but the prof was murdered by his rival, Professor Gii, before they were able to meet and read the manual together. Long story short, Gii, leader of DARK, wanted Jiro for his own devices, but Jiro wanted Gii six feet under, and it looked as if he'd gotten his wish...until now. Turns out Gii had his and his cronies' brains implanted into android bodies, and if that's not enough, he's got a kill switch! Gii's baby son Akira—now under the protection of a sweet girl named Rieko, who's being closely guarded by Jiro—is the key for his gigantic city-mashing Armageddon machine, so it's on! Sound twisted? You don't know the half of it. It's so twisted, in fact, that that's not even the twist. As great a series as *Android Kikaider* was (is), this finale is that much better—a super-mega pay-off for *Kikaider* fans. The character designs and animation are once again tops, the backgrounds brushed with the utmost skill and the dialogue a sci-fi smorgasbord of good, old-fashioned good [illegible]. Whether you caught the series or not, *Kikaider 01* is essential viewing. **Dave Halverson B+**

"As great a series as *Android Kikaider* was (is), this finale is that much better—a super-mega pay-off for *Kikaider* fans."

Studio: Bandai Entertainment
Rating: 13 & Up
Running Time: 100 Minutes
Volume: 1



Kiddy Grade

Case 3
Lies Beneath
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"Visually stunning and highly compelling, Kiddy Grade is definitely a series worth looking into this year"
--BPM Culture Magazine

"Must see anime of 2004"
--Wizard Magazine

Play Magazine gives it an "A"

www.kiddygrade.tv

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Volume 2 - Academy of Life
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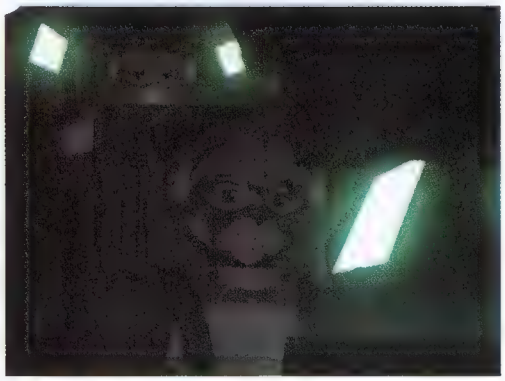
Gunparade March

School of mech



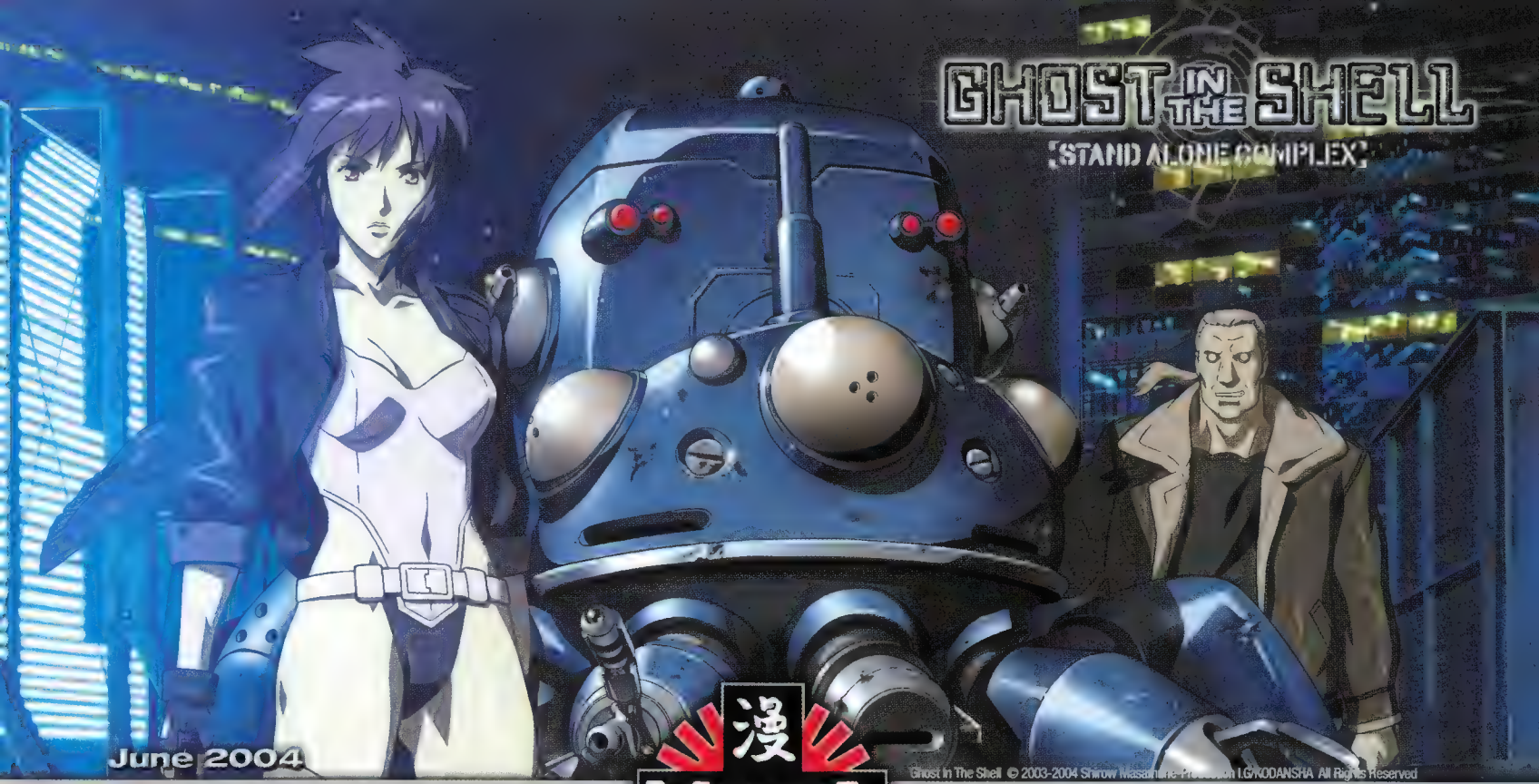
All I have to say is, "I want one."

If and when alien beings invade the Earth, I hope we have mechs and cute teenage high-school students to pilot them, otherwise, God help us. You see, Japan already has this all figured out. Before the decimation reaches Tokyo, they'll simply add mech-piloting to the high-school curriculum and—voilà!—if there's an attack during homeroom they can always take a makeup test. Such is the lot in life circa 1999 (yes, five years ago) for Unit 5121, the small high school class we're bunkered down with for *Gunparade March*. Unlike Evangelion's NERV—actually, the polar opposite of NERV—the 5121 (sounds like a Van Halen album, I know) is a simple unit consisting of three attractive female maintenance engineers, two personality-challenged instructors, an equally wooden commander and the sparse unit made up of three boys (a playboy, a "wildman" and a hopeless sap), three hot-bodied female pilots and one child/mascot in charge of alien suppositories called PBE bombs: huge manually delivered bombs that act like mini-nukes when all else fails. Outside of this core squad, there's not a shred of government involvement or any support group of any kind. We know that other such squadrons exist, but only because we hear the dead announced on the TV news after skirmishes. Otherwise we never see anyone (other than generic citizens) outside of the nucleus... which is fine, provided the episodes and characters are compelling enough to hold our interest.

The production is certainly up to the task—buffed to a gloss with muted color-schemes, unblemished characters and plenty of digital do-dads for a look in line with its SCEI/Pioneer pedigree—but the initial episodes languish in trite melodrama. Things don't really get moving until volume 2, but once they do, the series' overall promise becomes far more apparent. I still don't care about the lion's share of the characters, so there's still work to be done, but the potential for a compelling series is definitely afoot. Watch this one in Japanese, by the way; the English dub is asleep at the wheel. **Dave Halverson B-**

Studio: Anime Works
Rating: 13 & Up
Running Time: 100 Minutes
Volume: 1 & 2

"Things don't really get moving until volume 2, but once they do, the series' overall promise becomes far more apparent."


GHOST IN THE SHELL
STAND ALONE COMPLEX
June 2004
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10TH ANNIVERSARY

漫画 MANGA VIDEO

SUMMER 2004

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PRODUCTION I.G

Kaze no Yojimbo

The rebirth of a classic

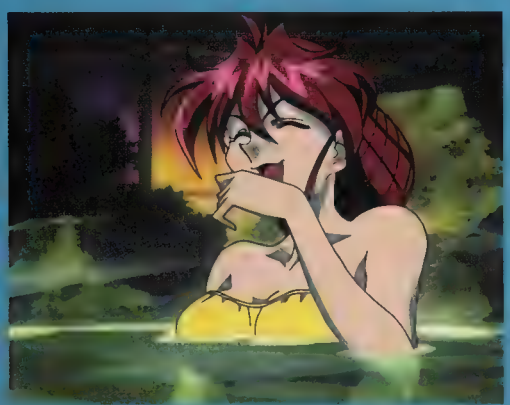
From the drab sepia tones of the cover, Kaze no Yojimbo immediately exudes the taste of an aged black-and-white film. However, this is wholly appropriate, since this anime is adapted from *Yojimbo* (*The Bodyguard*), a 1961 film directed by the world-famous Akira Kurosawa. Unlike its namesake, *Kaze no Yojimbo* does not take place in feudal Japan, but in more modern times.

Kimujuku is a small town plagued by rival gang warfare, but like many in this situation, the citizens prefer to simply let it happen instead of stirring up more trouble. Enter George Kodama, a quiet, intelligent man who is investigating an incident from 15 years earlier. Unfortunately, George's search for someone named Araki leads him directly into the middle of the gang rivalry—but luckily, he's no slouch in the fighting department. After saving the young daughter of a rich man with gang ties, George is hired to become her bodyguard as she travels to and from school.

Unless you are used to the timing and pace of old samurai flicks, then this first DVD of *KnY* could easily put you off. The plot takes shape slowly; some may even go so far as to call it dull. With somewhat sober and uninspired character designs and TV-quality animation, the allure of *KnY* is definitely not in its visuals. Either you'll be intrigued by the complex mystery or absolutely bored stiff. Patience, along with a fondness for old movies, is definitely a must. **Christina Alexander**

Studio: Bandai Entertainment
Rating: 16 and up
Running Time: 125 Minutes
Volume: 1

"Patience, along with a fondness for old movies, is definitely a must."



Slayers Excellent

Three and out

In the interest of breaking what we started, I [illegible] and *Excellent*. This three-episode seesaw ride concludes yet another chapter in the annals of Lina Inverse and Naga the Serpent, self-made arch rivals on a quest for food and getting all up in other people's business. Excellent starts off pretty well (thought I was gonna say "excellent," didn't cha?), flashing back to Lina and Naga's first fateful meeting, before they're lured into a not-so-dank keep to do battle with, and of course pillage, the resident evil. The next two episodes have their moments (a world full of Naga knock-offs, men included, is especially frightening), but don't hold a candle to *Great*'s and *Gorgeous*' singular 60-minute storylines. I'm pretty sure the whole Slayers thing has now played out. I've certainly had enough to hold me for a while. **Dave Halverson**

Studio: ADV Films
Rating: 15 and up
Running Time: 90 Minutes
Volume: 1

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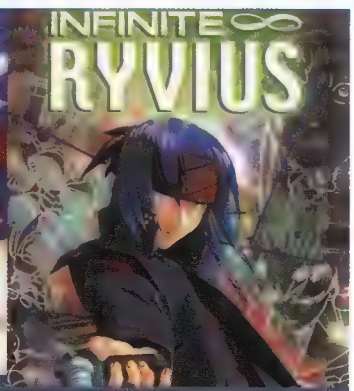
10 current series you gotta have

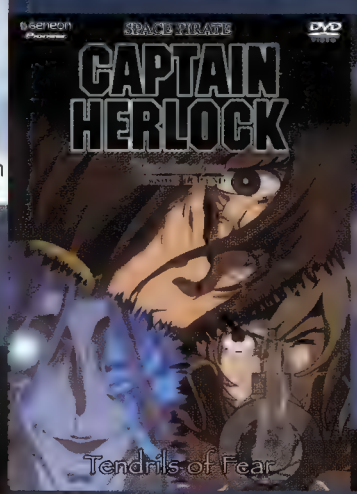
Last Exile
Studio: Geneon
Now Playing: Volume 3: Discovered Attack
Lavie and C

Kiddy Grade
Studio: Funimation
Now Playing: Volume 2: Pieces of the Past
New rivals

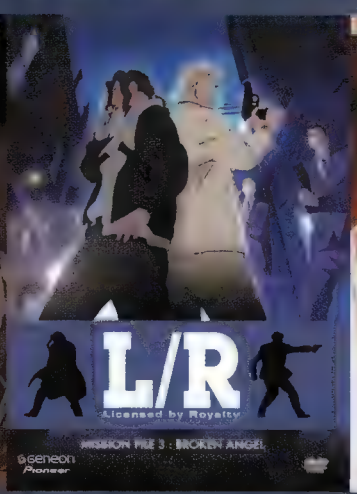
Sadamitsu The Destroyer
Studio: Anime Works
Now Playing: Volume 2: Invasion Squad



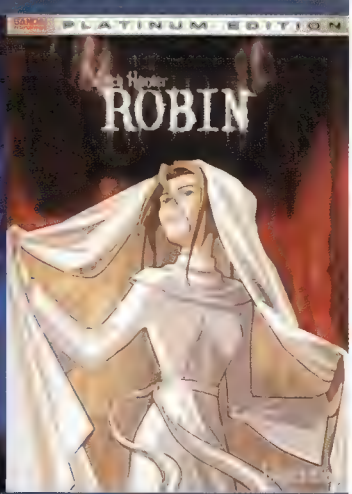
Infinite Ryvius
Studio: Bandai Entertainment
Now Playing: Volume 4: Change of Corr
A



Space Pirate: Captain Herlock
Studio: Geneon
Now Playing: Volume 2: Tendrils of Fear
Herlock and company face off against The



L/R Licensed by Royalty
Studio: Geneon
Now Playing: Volume 3: Broken Angel
No one does English super-spy capers like



Witch Hunter Robin
Studio: Bandai Entertainment
Now Playing: Volume 4: Fugitive
The tension mounts as Robin'

future shock

Lady Death
Studio: ADV Films
Coming in October
Be excited...be very excited. ADV's latest Fest meets West

Saiyuki
Studio: ADV Films
Now Playing: Volume 9: Children of Sacrifice
Our fav

Steam Detectives
Studio: ADV Films
Now Playing: Volume 4: Case

MSA Abenobashi
Studio: ADV Films
Now Playing: Volume 3: Impractical Magic
e third dimension just

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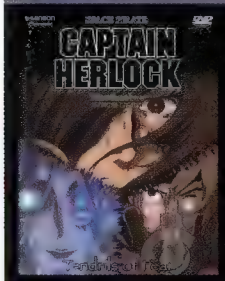
Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	**Cyborg 009**	*columbia tristar*
02	**Kino's Journey**	*tokyopop*
03	**Space Pirate Captain Herlock**	*geneon ent.*
04	**Last Exile**	*geneon entertainment*
05	**Inuyasha**	*viz*
06	**Full Metal Panic**	*adv films*
07	**Spirited Away**	*buena vista*
08	**Heat Guy J**	*geneon entertainment*
09	**Noir**	*adv films*
10	**Initial D**	*tokyopop*

Play Magazine Top Ten

01	**Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi**	*adv films*
02	**Last Exile**	*geneon entertainment*
03	**Space Pirate Captain Herlock**	*geneon ent.*
04	**Kiddy Grade**	*funimation productions*
05	**Birdy The Mighty**	*central park media*
06	**L/R Licensed by Royalty**	*geneon entertainment*
07	**Angelic Layer**	*adv films*
08	**Yukikaze**	*bandai entertainment*
09	**Sadamitsu The Destroyer**	*anime works*
10	**Initial D**	*tokyopop*

your megastore beckons!



Space Pirate Captain Herlock
geneon entertainment

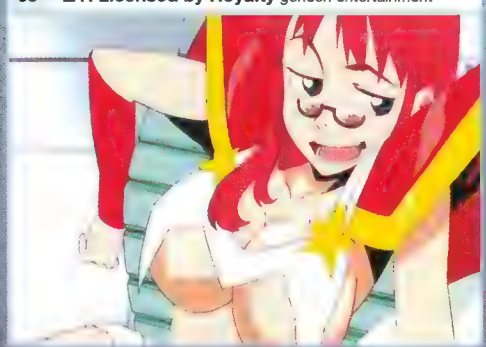
The classic space opera goes to bold new places with modern techniques and arguably the best strory in the lineage. Anime fan or not, Captain Herlock demands your attention.

Spirited Away
buena vista

Any who see it are touched by it, and anyone that hasn't must. Miyazaki magic at its finest.

Past Heavens

01	**Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi**	*adv films*
02	**Space Pirate Captain Herlock**	*geneon ent.*
03	**Kiddy Grade**	*funimation productions*
04	**Sadamitsu the Destroyer**	*anime works*
05	**L/R Licensed by Royalty**	*geneon entertainment*



Captive Heavens

01	**Last Exile**	*geneon entertainment*
02	**Kiddy Grade**	*funimation productions*
03	**Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi**	*adv films*
04	**Angelic Layer**	*adv films*
05	**Mao-chan**	*geneon entertainment*

Future Set

01	**Kiddy Grade**	*funimation productions*
02	**Comic Party**	*right stuf international inc.*
03	**Last Exile**	*geneon entertainment*
04	**Figure 17**	*media blasters*
05	**Slayers Excellent**	*adv films*

Reader's Anime Top Five

01	**Last Exile**	*geneon entertainment*
02	**Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi**	*adv films*
03	**Kiddy Grade**	*funimation productions*
04	**Ninja Scroll TV**	*urban vision*
05	**LotMN - Goemon The Good**	*adv films*

Play Magazine Manga Top Five

01	**Sgt. Frog!**	*tokyopop manga*
02	**Hellsing**	*dark horse*
03	**Battle Vixens**	*tokyopop manga*
04	**Saiyuki**	*tokyopop manga*
05	**The Demon Ororon**	*tokyopop manga*

Play Magazine Music Top Five

01	**Last Exile OST II Dolce Triade**	*geneon anime music*
02	**.hack//Legend of Twilight OST**	*bandai ent.*
03	**Hand Maid May Soundtrack**	*geneon anime music*
04	**Love Hina Best Collection**	*geneon anime music*
05	**Utena Original Soundtrack**	*geneon anime music*

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when the lines between reality
and the ultimate cyber battle blur,
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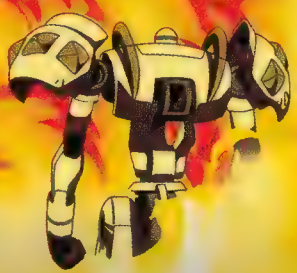

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Summer Movie Preview

So what if gas is three bucks a gallon? There's always a movie close by, and we're in for a banner summer...

Van Helsing

Release: May 7

Studio: Universal

Directed by: Stephen Sommers

Starring: Hugh Jackman, Kate Beckinsale

Synopsis: The Indiana Jones of monster hunting slays classic Universal monsters and killer concubines on his way to the ultimate prize: Count Dracula.

Looks good: The set design, along with the makeovers they've given the likes of Mr. Hyde, The Wolfman and Frankenstein, looks killer in the previews, and Kate Beckinsale can do no wrong.

What could go wrong: Residual Wolverine flashbacks and/or excessive wire work could spoil the fun. Jackman will have to play it just right. It may need some Van-story as well. Hacking away at monsters may get old fast, especially if Sommers plays it as cheeky as he did with the *Mummy* pictures.

Good for: $110 mil

Troy

Release: May 14

Studio: Warner Bros.

Directed by: Wolfgang Petersen

Starring: Brad Pitt, Eric Bana, Orlando Bloom, Diane Kruger

Synopsis: Inspired by Homer's epic, *Troy* tells the tale of the great Trojan War, brutally fought between the Greeks and the Trojans. Sparked by the lover's quarrel involving Prince Paris of Troy and Queen Helen of Sparta, the war sees an emerging hero in the awesome warrior known as Achilles.

Looks good: Director Wolfgang Petersen is a good choice for the material. This time period packs a spirited force, providing a perfect backdrop for a bloody good depiction of epic war.

What could go wrong: Have you seen the trailer? Bloated spectacle mixing with Brad Pitt's clunky presence in the role of Achilles smells like a problem.

Good for: $165 million

Shrek 2

Release: May 21

Studio: DreamWorks

Directed by: Andrew Adamson, Kelly Asbury, Conrad Vernon

Starring: Michael Myers, Cameron Diaz, Eddie Murphy, John Cleese, Julie Andrews, Antonio Banderas, Rupert Everett, Larry King

Synopsis: Full-time ogre Fiona brings Shrek home to the Kingdom of Far Far Away to meet the parents, after which the royal family becomes a royal pain.

Looks good: Leave it to DreamWorks to improve on perfection. Satire is in full bloom, and the casting is brilliant.

What could go wrong: Not a whole lot. Shrek 2 has everything that made the first universally beloved but with an even sharper wit.

Good for: $250 mil

The Day After Tomorrow

Release: May 28

Studio: 20th Century Fox

Directed by: Roland Emmerich

Starring: Dennis Quaid, Jake Gyllenhaal, Emmy Rossum, Sela Ward

Synopsis: The climate's changing in strange ways. The Earth is about to get annihilated by floods, earthquakes, hurricanes and pretty much anything else that could possibly be a result of massive global warming. Oh, and humanity must join together to save the day!

Looks good: The budget's enormous; watching the world end should at least look cool. And, and... well, at least it opens early when we're hungry for a slice of summer cheese.

What could go wrong: Everything. These disaster movies are routinely disastrous. You be the judge: Roland Emmerich was at the helm with *Godzilla* and *Independence Day*.

Good for: $145 million

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

Release: June 4

Studio: Warner Bros.

Directed by: Alfonso Cuaron

Starring: Daniel Radcliffe, Emma Watson, Rupert Grint, Gary Oldman

Synopsis: Harry's been working hard, already in his third year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. And his troubles are only beginning: a nasty killer named Sirus Black has escaped from Azkaban prison and Harry's his prime target.

Looks good: The last *Potter* was good, imaginative fun, and didn't pander to the child audience. The books are still white-hot and offer more than enough rich material for yet another fine fantasy.

What could go wrong: We're talking No. 3 here, folks. How long can the charm last?

Good for: $200 mil

Kaena: The Prophecy

Release: June 4 (LA and NYC)

Studio: IDP Dist

Directed by: Chris Delaporte, Pascal Pinon

Starring: Kirsten Dunst, Richard Harris, Anjelica Huston, Greg Proops, Michael McShane, Keith David

Synopsis: The tree world of Axis is in danger. Its sap has almost run dry and the people's pleas to the gods have gone unheard. A young girl, Kaena, haunted by visions that Axis is calling to her, will travel deep into its roots in defiance of her tribe, where she'll discover a truth that will change her life forever.

Looks good: This Parisian import's as pure a big-screen grown-up CG fantasy as we're ever going to get, and could give rise to the CG indie; let us pray.

What could go wrong: Nothing...zero expectations, beautiful (and mature for a change) design and a stellar vocal cast equals a big summer bonus.

Good for: $40 mil

The Chronicles of Riddick

Release: June 11

Studio: Universal

Directed by: David Twohy

Starring: Vin Diesel, Colm Feore, Thandie Newton, Karl Urban, Judi Dench

Synopsis: After five years on the galactic lam, Riddick is out to save the galaxy. Imprisoned on the planet Helion, deep within a savage, subterranean prison, Riddick's endeavor to escape brings him face to face with the all-powerful king of universal suffering: Lord Marshal.

Looks good: Twohy knows science fiction and Diesel knows this character. As long as they play it like *Pitch Black*, success is virtually assured.

What could go wrong: The prodigal son of action heroes got snarled in the cliché-riddled *xXx* (that Mat Hoffman scene was soooo painful) and *A Man Apart* tanked hard. If he plays it all action-hero, things could get ugly.

Good for: $90 mil

Garfield: The Movie

Release: June 11

Studio: 20th Century Fox

Directed by: Peter Hewitt

Starring: Breckin Meyer, Jennifer Love Hewitt, Stephen Tobolowsky, Bill Murray as the voice of Garfield

Synopsis: Live action and CG collide, bringing the 260-million-reader-strong syndicated comic strip about the world's laziest fat cat to cinematic life. This one is all about Odie (CG not included), with at least two sequels in the wings.

Looks good: Jennifer Love Hewitt: you could dress her in a Steel Sak and we'd still line up. Plus with Bill Murray as the voice, Garfield has the makings of a gargantuan franchise.

What could go wrong: Peter Hewitt's last and perhaps only good movie, *Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey*, happened almost a decade ago, and *Garfield* will need a similar edge to draw its mature fan base. Too kiddy and this kitty is toast. Anything below a PG-13 and it goes in the litter box.

Good for: $120 mil

Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story

Release: June 18

Studio: 20th Century Fox

Directed by: Rawson Marshall Thurber

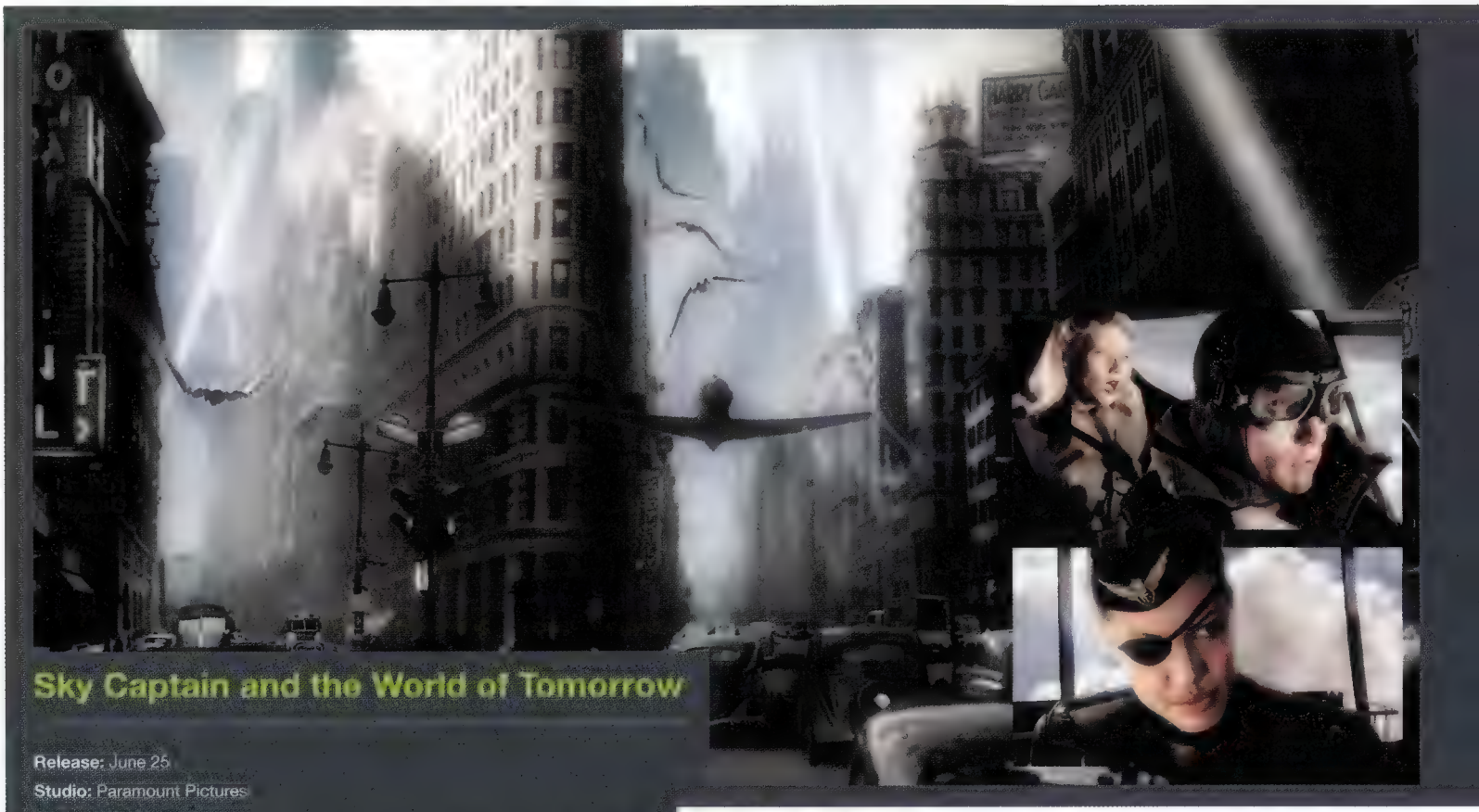
Starring: Vince Vaughn, Ben Stiller, Christine Taylor, Rip Torn

Synopsis: *Zoolander* meets *Used Cars*. A small gym is threatened with extinction by a gleaming sports and fitness palace unless a gaggle of social misfits can rise to victory in the ultimate dodgeball competition.

Looks good: Looking at the cast, this could be the next *Zoolander*, and Stiller is on a major roll.

What could go wrong: Rawson Marshall Thurber's walking a fine line in his directorial debut with a premise that's been done to death. Opening opposite *Sky Captain* and *Garfield* doesn't help either.

Good for: $75 mil



Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow

Release: June 25

Studio: Paramount Pictures

Directed by: Kerry Conran

Starring: Jude Law, Gwyneth Paltrow, Angelina Jolie, Giovanni Ribisi

Synopsis: When New York comes under attack by amazing new technological marvels, it's Captain Sky to the rescue. An homage to the grand serials of the 1930s like Flash Gordon, Rocketmen and Buck Rogers, *Sky Captain* celebrates the grandiose plots and daring of a bygone era.

Looks good: One hundred percent CG outside of the actors, Kerry Conran's bold endeavor looks revolutionary, and the casting couldn't be better.

What could go wrong: Opening a week after *Shrek 2* is scary business, and as imaginative and beautiful as *Sky Captain* looks, nothing is critic proof, and in the U.S., if they don't get it (and they often don't), they usually trash it.

Good for: $90 mil

Spider-Man 2

Release: July 2

Studio: Columbia

Directed by: Sam Raimi

Starring: Tobey Maguire, Kirsten Dunst, Alfred Molina, James Franco

Synopsis: Dr. Otto Octavius has been turned into the nasty, tentacled freak, Doctor Octopus; Spider-Man's life is about to get even rougher. But two years since the last adventure, Spider-Man's dealing with more than just villains, finding his love life heating up and his spider senses becoming increasingly haunting.

Looks good: Sam Raimi's back to direct, and he's learned from the last movie. Word on the street is that the script offers much more depth, now that the setup is out of the way.

What could go wrong: Given the first film's huge $820 million worldwide gross, there's a lot to live up to here. But early looks are very positive.

Good for: $185 million

King Arthur

Release: July 7

Studio: Touchstone Pictures

Directed by: Antoine Fuqua

Starring: Clive Owen, Stephen Dillane, Keira Knightley

Synopsis: Taking place somewhere between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Dark Ages, King Arthur explores the life of the powerful king and the politics and mood of the time. Taking less of a mystical approach to its storytelling, the film intends to bring a more serious tone to the legend.

Looks good: This one's got some quiet buzz going around. The legend of King Arthur carries rich possibilities; it's always good to see the rousing story brought to life onscreen.

What could go wrong: The competition is fierce this year, with an unusual amount of period pieces dominating the action-drama category.

Good for: $70 million

Anchorman

Release: July 9

Studio: DreamWorks

Directed by: Adam McKay

Starring: Will Ferrell, Christina Applegate, David Koechner

Synopsis: Ron Burgundy (Ferrell) wants so badly to be the number-one anchorman at his local TV station that when a new knockout female partner rolls into town, he'll stop at nothing to maintain his status. Nastiness quickly ensues in this raucous comedy, co-written by Will Ferrel and former *Saturday Night Live* writer Adam McKay.

Looks good: Will Ferrel is on a roll right now. This is comedy ripe for the summer, with a premise that could be big on laughs.

What could go wrong: These comedies are hit and miss, and the movie seems to be going for easy laughs.

Good for: $60 million

The Bourne Supremacy

Release: July 23

Studio: Universal

Directed by: Paul Greengrass

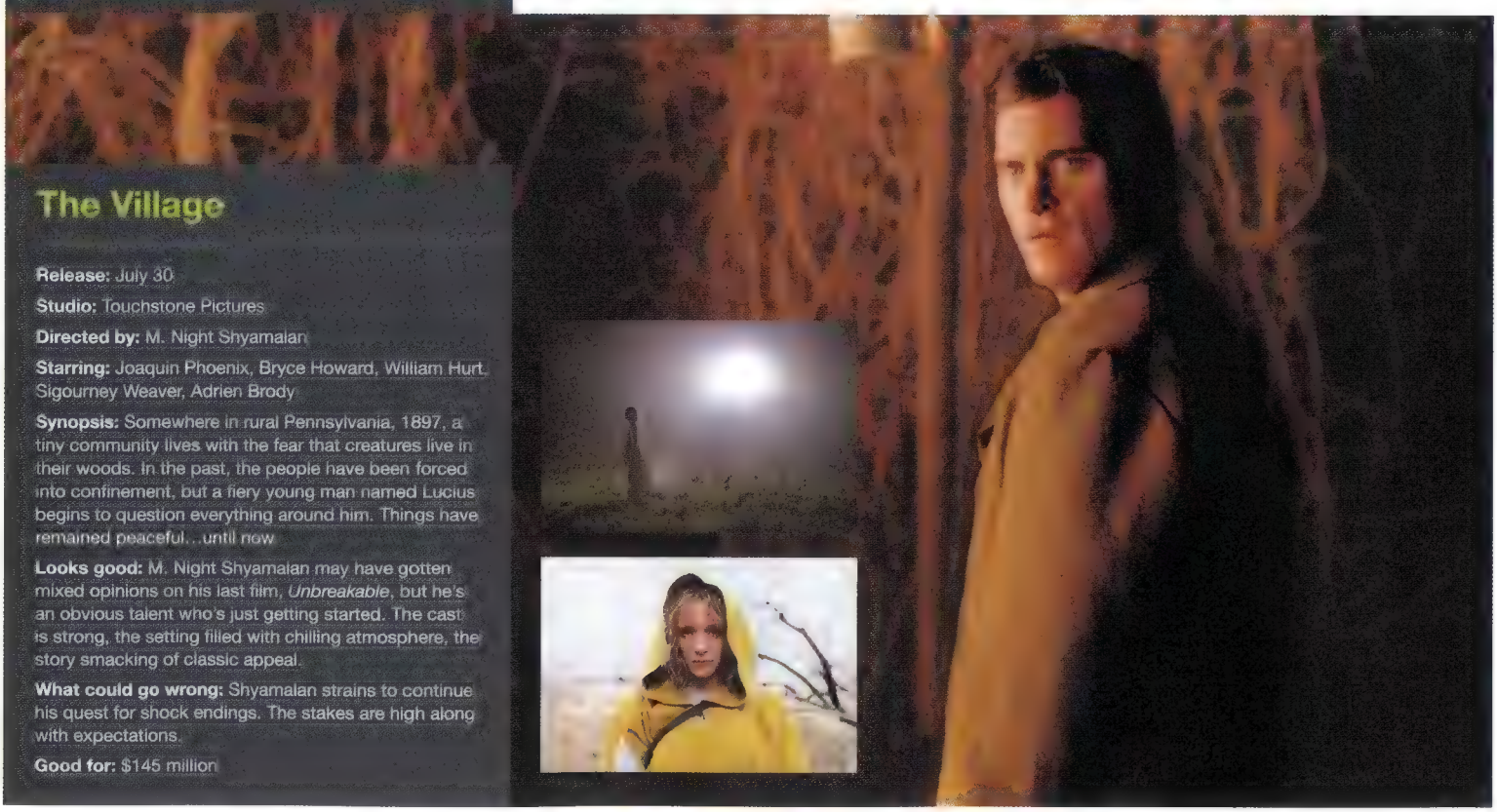
Starring: Matt Damon, Franka Potente, Joan Allen

Synopsis: The sequel to the surprise hit *The Bourne Identity*, the proceedings begin with the murder of the Chinese vice-premier, which leaves evidence that assassin Jason Bourne is somehow involved. So off he goes to piece together fragments of his missing identity and rescue the woman who once saved him.

Looks good: It's good to see a more story-driven affair mixing in with the big effects of the summer. Matt Damon fits the part like a glove.

What could go wrong: Matt Damon's been less than bankable as of late, and it's always scary to see a new director working a sequel.

Good for: $55 million



The Village

Release: July 30

Studio: Touchstone Pictures

Directed by: M. Night Shyamalan

Starring: Joaquin Phoenix, Bryce Howard, William Hurt, Sigourney Weaver, Adrien Brody

Synopsis: Somewhere in rural Pennsylvania, 1897, a tiny community lives with the fear that creatures live in their woods. In the past, the people have been forced into confinement, but a fiery young man named Lucius begins to question everything around him. Things have remained peaceful...until now.

Looks good: M. Night Shyamalan may have gotten mixed opinions on his last film, *Unbreakable*, but he's an obvious talent who's just getting started. The cast is strong, the setting filled with chilling atmosphere, the story smacking of classic appeal.

What could go wrong: Shyamalan strains to continue his quest for shock endings. The stakes are high along with expectations.

Good for: $145 million

Catwoman

Release: July 30

Studio: Warner Bros.

Directed by: Pitof

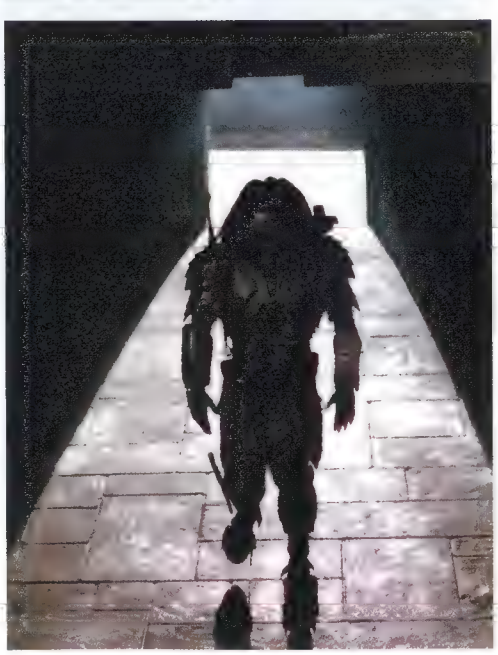
Starring: Halle Berry, Sharon Stone, Benjamin Bratt, Lambert Wilson

Synopsis: A shy and sensitive graphic designer working for a cosmetics company on the verge of releasing a revolutionary anti-aging product discovers the company's dark secret and finds herself in the middle of a corporate conspiracy. Luckily, she also discovers the newfound strength, speed, agility and ultra-keen cat senses to deal with it, when she becomes... Catwoman!

Looks good: Halle Berry is an amazing actress, and Pitof (*The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc, Alien: Resurrection, The City of Lost Children*) is a true master of visual effects.

What could go wrong: Acting her way around what appears to be the cheesiest costume in super hero history may prove insurmountable even for Berry (no one has a head that bulbous), and Pitof's unproven as a director.

Good for: $150 mil



Thunderbirds

Release: August 6

Studio: Universal

Directed by: Jonathan Frakes

Starring: Bill Paxton, Anthony Edwards, Sophia Myles, Ben Kingsley

Synopsis: Entrepreneur and former astronaut Jeff Tracy leads his top-secret organization, International Rescue, into battle once again when the maniacal master criminal The Hood invades their top-secret island paradise, Tracy Island.

Looks good: The vivid CG lends itself to the series' color schemes nicely and Bill Paxton has the keen ability to shape-shift into whatever role he's given. Plus it arrives after the dust has settled.

What could go wrong: Already has: huge mistake going live-action, given the advances in miniatures, puppetry and stop-motion animation. What could have been a neo-campy hit reigniting a beloved era aspires to be nothing more than a generic sci-fi throwback. The *real* Thunderbirds are not a go.

Good for: $60 mil

Alien Vs. Predator

Release: August 13

Studio: 20th Century Fox

Directed by: Paul W.S. Anderson

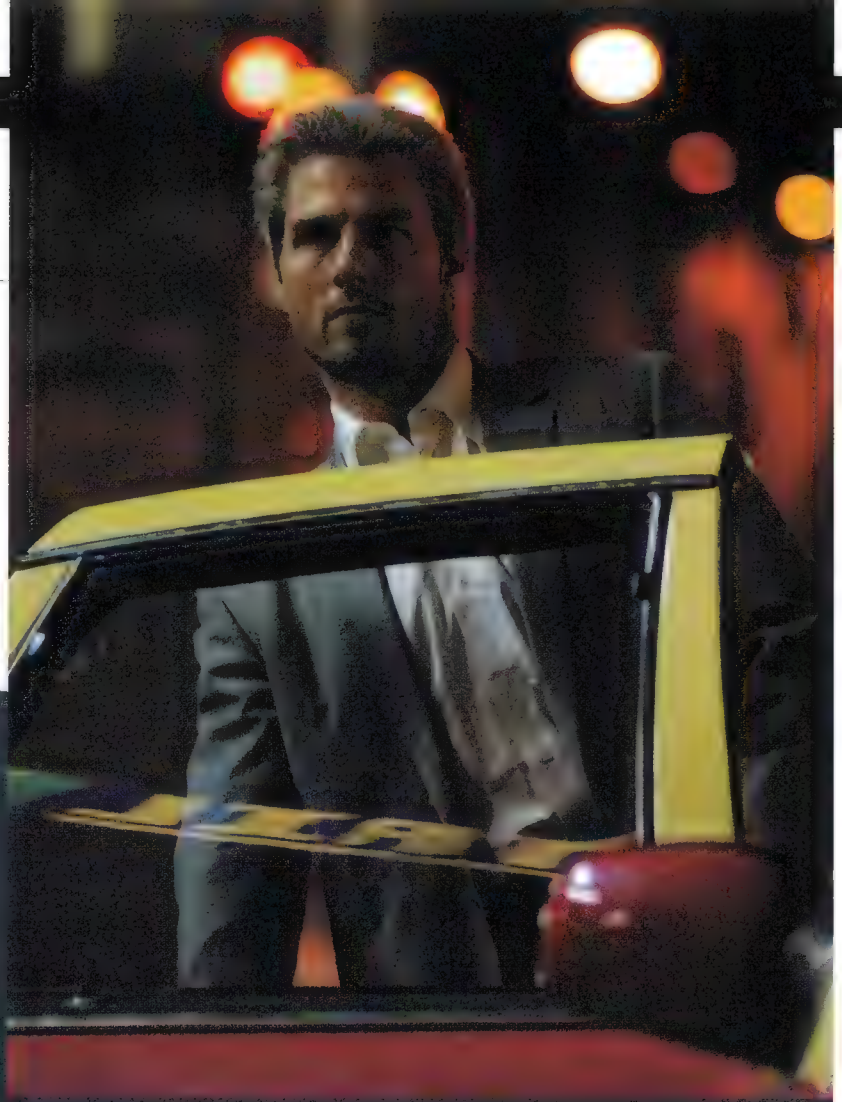
Starring: Sanaa Lathan, Raoul Bova, Colin Salmon, Lance Henriksen

Synopsis: We're back on earth, and thanks to an archaeological dig in the heart of the Antarctic Circle, alien facehuggers have been discovered in dead bodies. You know what happens from there. The big surprise this time out is that Predators are involved in the hunt. The result: only one species is getting out alive.

Looks good: Aliens versus Predators? Hell yeah! Paul W.S. Anderson, who directed *Event Horizon* and *Resident Evil*, has a slick visual style that fits the tone of the movie well.

What could go wrong: Aliens versus Predators? Gonna take a sharp script to make it work without getting mired in cliché. Given the number of dramatically different movies across both series, fans are gonna be torn for what they want.

Good for: $75 million



Collateral

Release: August 6

Studio: DreamWorks

Directed by: Michael Mann

Starring: Tom Cruise, Jamie Foxx, Paul Adelstein

Synopsis: A killer is loose on the streets of LA, tagging unsuspecting victims in a one-night marathon as he's driven by a lone cab driver.

Looks good: Frank Darabont, the writer/director of *Shawshank Redemption* and *The Green Mile*, wrote the script. Michael Mann is one of the best directors working today, and his return to the streets of LA hearkens back to the gripping *Heat*.

What could go wrong: Tom Cruise is always bankable, but not always the best fit. Not likely this one will be anything less than very good.

Good for: $115 million

Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence

Release: August/TBA

Studio: Go Fish Pictures (DreamWorks)

Directed by: Mamoru Oshii

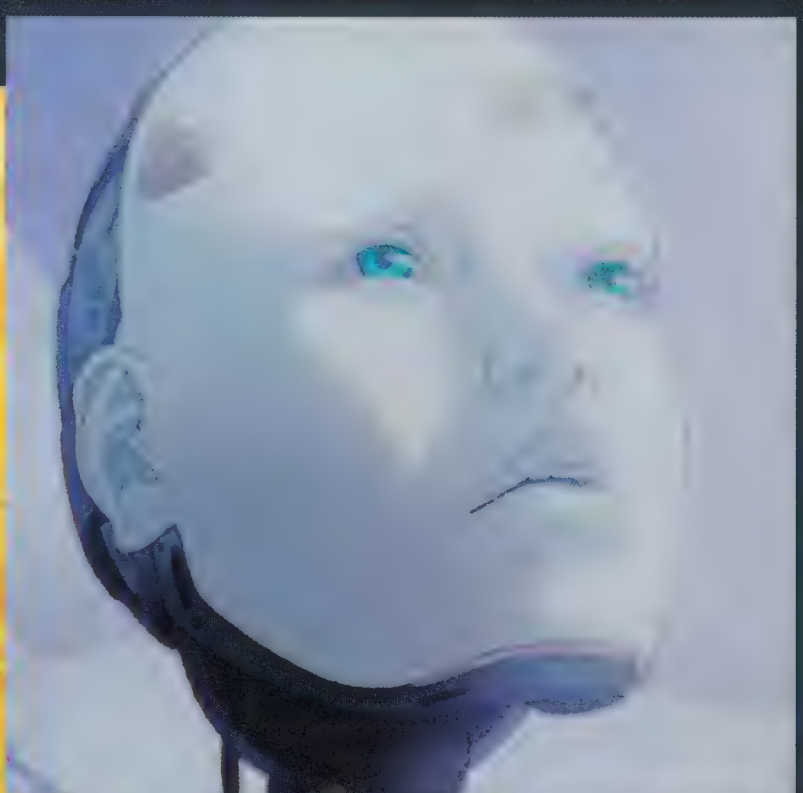
Starring: TBA

Synopsis: In the year 2032, the line between human and machine has almost disappeared. Batou is a cyborg. His body is artificial; the only remnants left of his humanity are traces of his brain... and the memories of a woman called The Major.

Looks Good: This is drop-dead gorgeous adult animation the way God intended, and this time it will find a much broader audience on the heels of the new TV series, and with the backing of DreamWorks. Anime finally really is coming to America. Prepare to be awed.

What could go wrong: Barring the world blowing up, not much.

Good For: $40 million



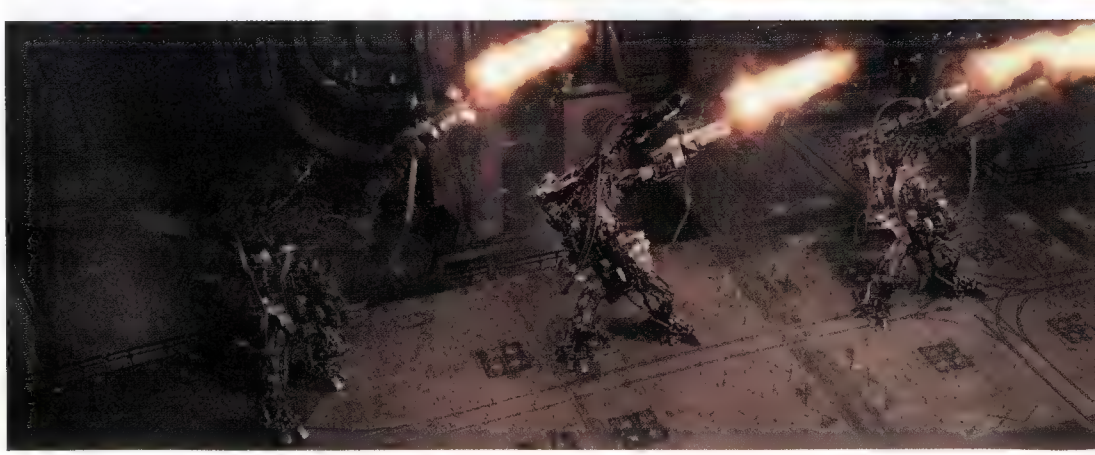
The Matrix Revolutions

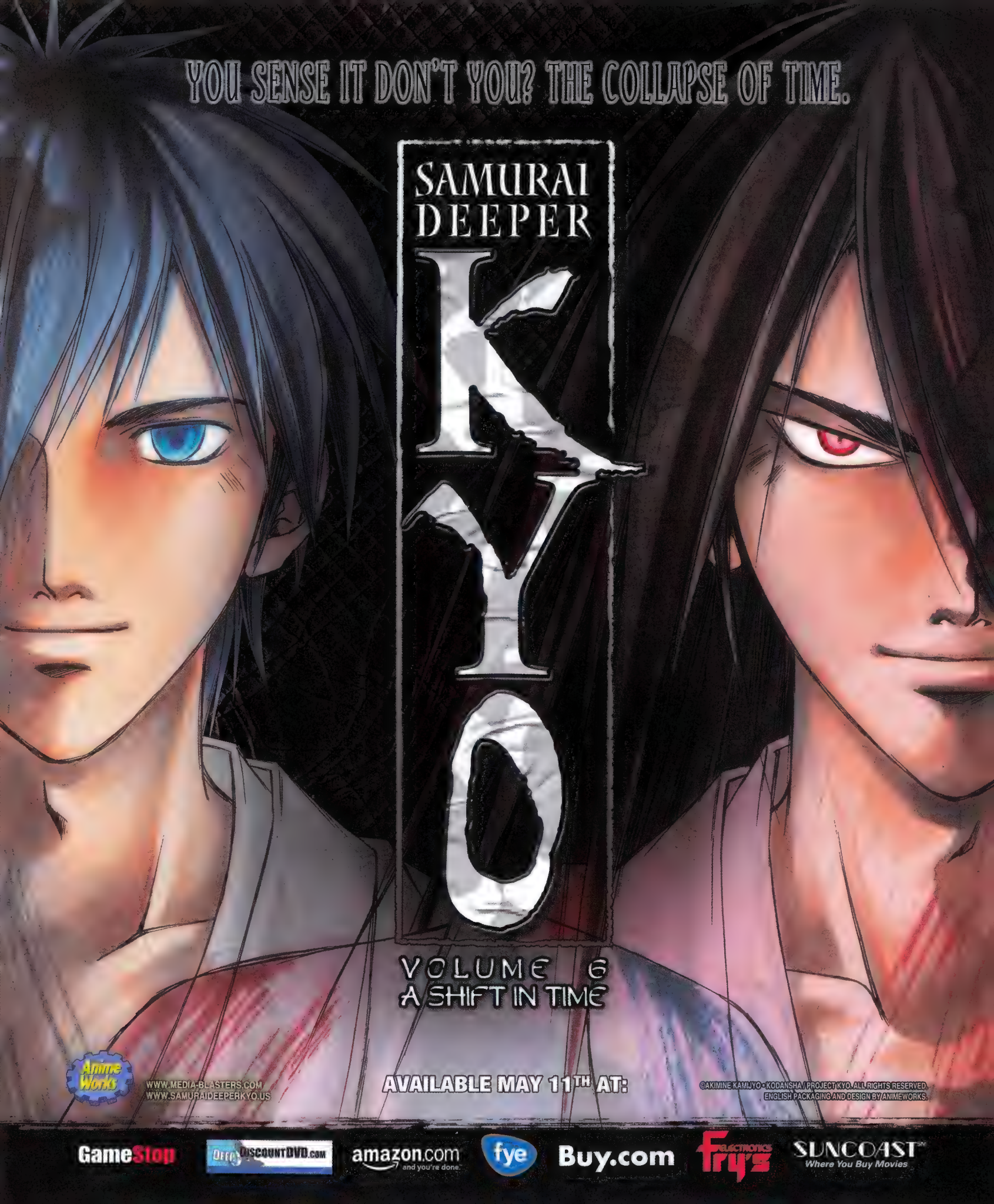
Starring: Keanu Reeves, Laurence Fishburne, Carrie-Ann Moss, Hugo Weaving, Jada Pinkett Smith
Director: Andy and Larry Wachowski
Released By: Warner Bros.
Rated: R

Coming out of *The Matrix Revolutions*, I was filled with the kind of exhilaration that comes from witnessing something extraordinary, thankful once again that thousands of people can come together on a singular vision and through sheer talent, sacrifice and determination achieve something truly grand for the sole purpose of entertaining an audience. What's so special about *The Matrix* in particular, though, is the audience in question. This wasn't an adapted novel, family epic, CG toon or drama. This was a hardcore science-fiction trilogy—moreover, three films' worth of innovative live-action anime. As with *Reloaded*, my balloon was quickly burst by a sea of critics floating in their pompous boats, citing that it was somehow something less than it should have been, but I'm at the point now where I only see films certain critics hate.

As far as I'm concerned, the prophecy was aptly fulfilled on both the philosophical and action sides of the equation. Neo's love conquered Smith's fatalistic, and I was privy to 17 minutes of combined live-action, CG and miniatures that I will never forget, as the humans made their last stand against the machines: a single scene that took two years and thousands of people to create. But as groundbreaking as that was, and will likely remain for many years to come, what struck me the most about *Revolutions* were moments of closure I'd envisioned for years. The final scene with Neo and Trinity; his Christ-like sacrifice; the tear in Morpheus' eye as he realized that Neo had saved them, preceded by what I consider one of the best moments in science fiction since the thumbs-up in T2, as Trinity pierced the sky above the machine city... "Beautiful." And don't even get me started about what they did with rain. The Psychic Force-like last battle between Neo and Smith took me places I'd never dreamt of going, watching singular drops of rain break as they squared off. It's all here in a disc worth of incredibly well-produced extras.

One must also consider where *The Matrix* is going from here. As the sun rose on the exiles, we weren't witnessing the end, but a new virtual beginning. The online game will now take us from gel-filled pods into that very world for us to shape and develop. A place we can go to just to hang out in the clubs or rise through the ranks of the new factions that arise (the highest honor being a meeting with a character from the movie universe). From this point on, the fans will determine the ultimate outcome. I can't imagine a grander vision than one that takes us from the simulated world to the real world and then turns us loose at home in a simulation to help shape it. To say it is anything less than profound simply holds no logic. **Dave Halverson**
Movie: A- DVD: A

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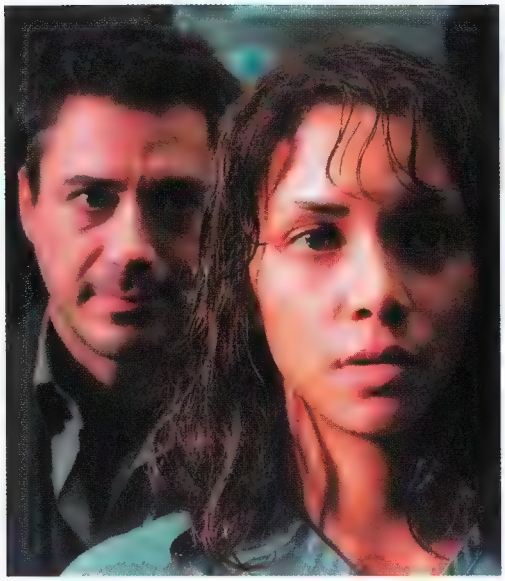


Gothika

Starring: Halle Berry, Charles Dutton, Robert Downey Jr., John Carroll Lynch, Bernard Hill, Penelope Cruz
Director: Mathieu Kassovitz
Released By: Warner Bros.
Rated: R

Someone needs to tell Mathieu Kassovitz that old Chevrolets don't have remote door locks (big movie mistake there), but otherwise *Gothika* fires on all cylinders. In fact, I haven't been this creeped-out since *The Sixth Sense*. What I like about *Gothika* is how it seems to be playing into every cliché—slip-sliding between delusion and reality on its way to a rational conclusion—when it turns briskly into a true-blue ghost story. Clinical mumbo jumbo aside, at the end of the day, she really is seeing dead people. In fact, it's the merging of plausible reality and the spirit world that makes this such a horrible homerun (while setting up a possible *Gothika 2* nicely in the process).
Halle Berry again becomes her character, and Penelope Cruz, Charles Dutton, Robert Downey Jr. and John Lynch all deliver inspired performances. *Gothika* draws us into a living hell and never lets us go.
Extras: Bare bones, I'm afraid: movie trailer, commentary and the Limp Bizkit video. A shame, considering how complex a film this was to make. You know they're going to hit us with a Special Edition, those bastards. **DH**
Movie: B **DVD:** C-

Starship Troopers 2

Starring: Richard Burgi, Kelly Carlson, Ed Lauter, Sandrine Holt
Director: Phil Tippett
Released By: Columbia/TriStar
Rated: R

Starship Troopers remains one of the, if not *the*, most underrated sci-fi epics of all time. After *Showgirls*, critics were quick to jump all over aspects of *Troopers* that Verhoven had become known and renowned for—the same mindless cartoon violence and trite stories that garnered praise before his Vega slip in films like *RoboCop* and *Total Recall*. Roger Ebert nailed it (as usual) when he said "*Star Wars* is humanist, *Starship Troopers* is totalitarian," but most critics, obviously unfamiliar with the Heinlein novel, missed the point entirely and reviewed the film as if Verhoven was attempting to make a *Star Wars*. As a result, Troopers tanked, and what should have been at least a trilogy has ended up with a direct-to-DVD anti-sequel. For *Troopers 2*, effects maestro Phil Tippett directs, stripping away all of Verhoven's 90210 soap opera gleam and totalitarianism, as well as any Earthbound scenes, but only after a short, pathetic attempt at the more-meat-for-the-grinder WWII-style recruitment campaign that made the first such campy fun. Instead, Tippett (in line with the direct-to-DVD budget, I'm sure) confines *Troopers 2* to a single remote outpost where a small band of mobile infantry make their last stand against CG hordes of his old bug (just the one generic species) along with one new, and I must admit, very cool, bug. But that's it. Shot on digital tape, *Troopers 2* is a simple by-the-numbers elimination story—albeit a fairly good one, especially for a direct-to-DVD release—but it's nowhere near a proper sequel to Verhoven's visually astonishing, hyper-violent epic. As disposable as Verhoven's characters were, these are like human toilet paper. Kill 'em all, please. **DH**
Movie: C+ **DVD:** N/A

Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World

Starring: Russell Crowe, Paul Bettany
Director: Peter Weir
Released By: 20th Century Fox
Rated: PG-13

Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World is a gentleman's action film—a rousing high-seas adventure that absolutely revels in its opportunity to paint its time period with wide swaths of intimacy and wondrous adventure. The movie stars the magnificent Russell Crow as Captain Jack, a confident yet vulnerable British commander of the HMS Surprise—ordered to "intercept the French privateer Acheron. You will sink, burn or take her as a prize." And so goes the basic conflict of this spirited adventure, which follows the lives of men, and boys, in the claustrophobia of the ship's bowels and the stormy decks of everyday life on the open sea. Everyday life, that is, until the cannons explode between the predator and the prey, whose roles are constantly threatening to shift. The battles are thrilling, building in their intensity as the damage increases and the men's resolve disintegrates. Director Peter Weir handles the action with a master's touch, but never does he leave the emotion up to the big bangs. Pulled from the dense series of novels of the same name, *Master and Commander* retains the books' rich characters and affecting relationships. The movie is not afraid to find quiet and romance in its scenery alone: in a stop-off at the Galapagos Islands, the men movingly reflect on the culminating passions of their world. As we watch, we can't help but be swept away along with them.
Extras: An endless offering of dense material: documentaries, substantial featurettes, 24 minutes of deleted scenes, a couple galleries and vignettes. **BF**
Movie: A+ **DVD:** A-

Bubba Ho-Tep

Starring: Ossie Davis, Bruce Campbell
Director: Don Coscarelli
Released By: MGM
Rated: R

Elvis and JFK—well, a delusional JFK who thinks he's been dyed black and had his brain replaced with sand—have seen better days. They're bitter old farts stuck in a Texas rest home, and that's not the worst of it: Bubba Ho-Tep, a soul-sucking mummy, is stalking the halls, taking the life of the hapless old-timers. In between scenes of low-brow humor you can't help but laugh at and entertainingly creepy encounters with Bubba Ho-Tep, the two friends reflect on their past, building a camaraderie that even manages to tug on the heart a bit. And that's about all that happens. The low-budget movie wisely plays the material straight, with writer/director Don Coscarelli handling the strangeness with a keen eye for cult charm. It doesn't hurt that Bruce Campbell delivers a delightful performance, playing a vulnerable, funny Elvis to near perfection. *Bubba Ho-Tep*'s quirky energy spins the type of rare crowd-pleaser that's missing in these bloated big-budget times.
Extras: Bonus features include three separate commentaries (with the stars, director, executive producer and writer all participating), theatrical trailers, deleted scenes and a couple featurettes. **BF**
Series: B **DVD:** B

Dieselboy: Master of the DJ World

www.djdieselboy.com

Like many kids who grew up as a child of the '80s, Damien Higgins spent his fair share of time ensconced in the role-playing world of Dungeons and Dragons. Little did Damien, later known to his loyal fans as DJ Dieselboy, know that he himself would master another world—the world of drum & bass. As the precursor to Harry Potter and as the more interactive brother of Tolkein's Lord of the Rings series, Dungeons and Dragons escorted legions of youth to other worlds—much like Dieselboy's successful albums and stellar sets offer to listeners today. Paying homage to his childhood pastime (and his current collecting passion), Dieselboy titled his most recent release The Dungeonmaster's Guide: A Drum & Bass Revolution. Following on the heels of his pioneering U.S. releases, including Project Human, 6ixth Sense and A Solider's Story, Dieselboy has been moving crowds for years that belie his youthful good looks. Dieselboy took a breather from his breakneck schedule to chat with Play about his new album, his love for video games, and where he gets such wonderful toys.

So why did the future fascinated DJ and University of Pittsburgh graduate dredge up this particular segment of his life, namely that of wizards, warriors and tossing dice? "I get bored quickly and I wanted to do something completely different—something that was not a carbon copy of everything out there—or for that matter anything I had ever done," replies the thoughtful Dieselboy. "For me, an album is more than simply the music—it is the coming together of the graphics, the personal touch—and at this point in my life, D&D offered this unique chance to bring it all together."

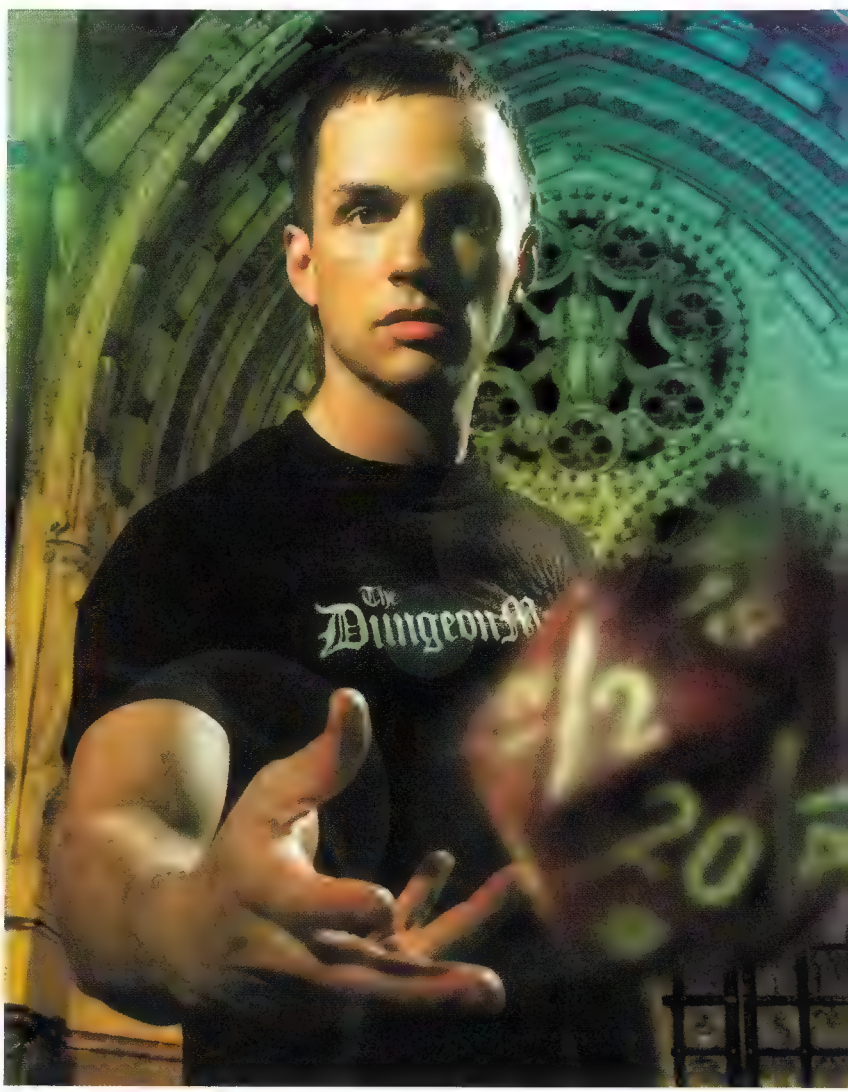
An avid toy collector who is constantly being presented with rare gems from around the world, Dieselboy has set his collecting sights on old D&D manuals and, like many of his other pursuits, has managed a great deal of success in tracking down the hard-to-find books of his past. "I am still looking for a number of them, so if anyone has them hidden away, feel free to help me complete my collection," jokes the good-natured Philadelphia resident. A humbling experience occurred that fused his love of toys and his musical innovation when he landed Peter Cullen, voice of The Transformers' Optimus Prime, to narrate the intro to Dungeonmaster. "It was a very indescribable experience, hearing this literal voice of my childhood introducing my new project to the world," muses Dieselboy. "Humbling and overwhelming does not even begin to describe it."

His new CD features drum & bass

treatments of some of the best-know DJs and producers in the game—Sasha, BT and Tiesto to name a few. "I aimed as high as I could and, given the hectic nature of schedules—believe me, I understand—I was pleased with the number of people who were able to come through on the project," states Dieselboy. "I am proud of the end result, knowing that had I not pursued these guys, a collaboration of this nature—say, between Gridlok and Josh Wink—would never have seen the light of day."

Dieselboy, who has created and contributed tracks for games ranging from Amplitude to NFL Gameday 2004, finds his involvement in the gaming world a refreshing break from the traditional music business. "I'm working on tracks for Gran Turismo 4 as we speak, and I still cannot really comprehend that I can go from playing the games as a kid to creating music for them as an adult." So what does the DJ who games play? "The irony is that when I had no life I also had no money to buy games. Now that I am more comfortable financially, I have little time to play. But when I can steal away some time, Rainbow Six and Manhunt really suck me in—but I am really waiting for the next Metal Gear."

Managing his label (HUMAN), performing around the globe, producing a new CD and collecting childhood artifacts on eBay comprise only part of a mind-blowing pace. But the workaholic is already thinking ahead to other projects. "I am working with a rock band, trying to create a fusion between rock and drum & bass—and having a great time trying to work out all the kinks." A tour in support of Dungeonmaster will follow, as well as his regular Planet of the Drums dates with AK 1200, DJ Dara and MC J Messinian, giving fans ample opportunity to indulge in their passion for DJ Dieselboy, pioneer and true soldier on the front lines of U.S.—make that global—drum & bass. **Lucas Mast**

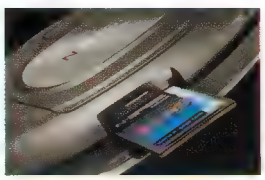


"I get bored quickly and I wanted to do something completely different—something that was not a carbon copy of everything out there..."

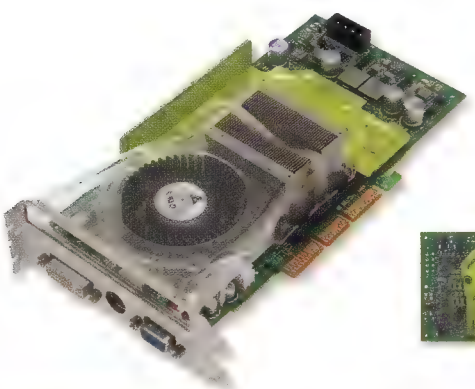
human
system RECORDINGS

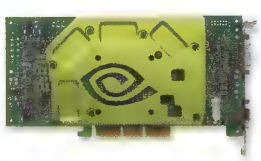
Nokia N-Gage QD

www.n-gage.com — Price: TBD



No one will argue that the N-Gage was—how can we say it?—"design challenged" when it was launched last year. With its poor button design and oddly located cart slot, it was destined for failure. At this year's Game Developers Conference (GDC), Nokia revealed their new and improved N-Gage—the QD. Sporting a slighter, thicker design (which feels much better in your hands during gameplay), sturdier buttons and longer battery life, the N-Gage QD just might save Nokia's ill-fated platform. Other key improvements include a brighter screen (and incidentally, the lame border around the screen has been removed, thus making the screen "appear" larger) and the ability to launch a game immediately after it's inserted. No more sifting through menu after menu to play the game. On the style front, the QD does away with embarrassing "side-talking" allowing users to make calls in league with most conventional PDA phones. Of course, the biggest advancement is the ability to load a game without taking the thing apart. Located underneath the screen is a rubber protective flap that reveals a game slot. Just slide the game in and you're ready to play...without disturbing the battery. What a concept. Now N-Gage is go!





NVIDIA GeForce FX 5950 Graphics Chip

www.nvidia.com — Price: $499

So you've just gotten your tax refund and now you're ready to beef up your video card so you can play all of the latest and greatest PC games coming out this year. Which one do you go for? After exhaustive testing with various boards, we were most impressed with NVIDIA's GeForce FX 5950 Ultra. Taking advantage of 0.13 micron process technology, our FX 5950 enabled higher performance through faster clock rates. Utilizing Intellisample high-resolution compression technology (HCT), the overall experience was beyond words. Players are treated to ultra-realistic visuals at high-resolution levels (even with anti-aliasing turned way up). The GeForce 5950 also incorporates NVIDIA's patented UltraShadow technology for shadow-intensive games like Doom III and Abducted. And with its advanced pixel shaders, the CineFX 2.0 engine, the floating-point pixel shader power is doubled from previous GPUs. Load this baby up with an AMD 64 or Pentium 4 with Hyper-Threading and you'll be swimming in butter.

Trailer Trash Wristwatches

www.trailertrashproducts.com — Price: $45-$75

You may have seen them on MTV or the ESPN X Games and wondered, "Where can I score a watch as funky as that?" Well, ponder no more. Now, you too can wear the fashion accessory that's taking the nation (at least the portion on wheels) by storm. From Trailer Trash Products, it's the sweatband watch. With a high-quality band that could survive a nuclear blast, it's perfect for folks on the go, completely water resistant, and even doubles as a stopwatch. Available in sweatband and thick leather style wristbands—for the (cough) rocker in you. Who needs the bling when you can have Trash chic?

Photos: Michael Tran

Street Fighter round 1

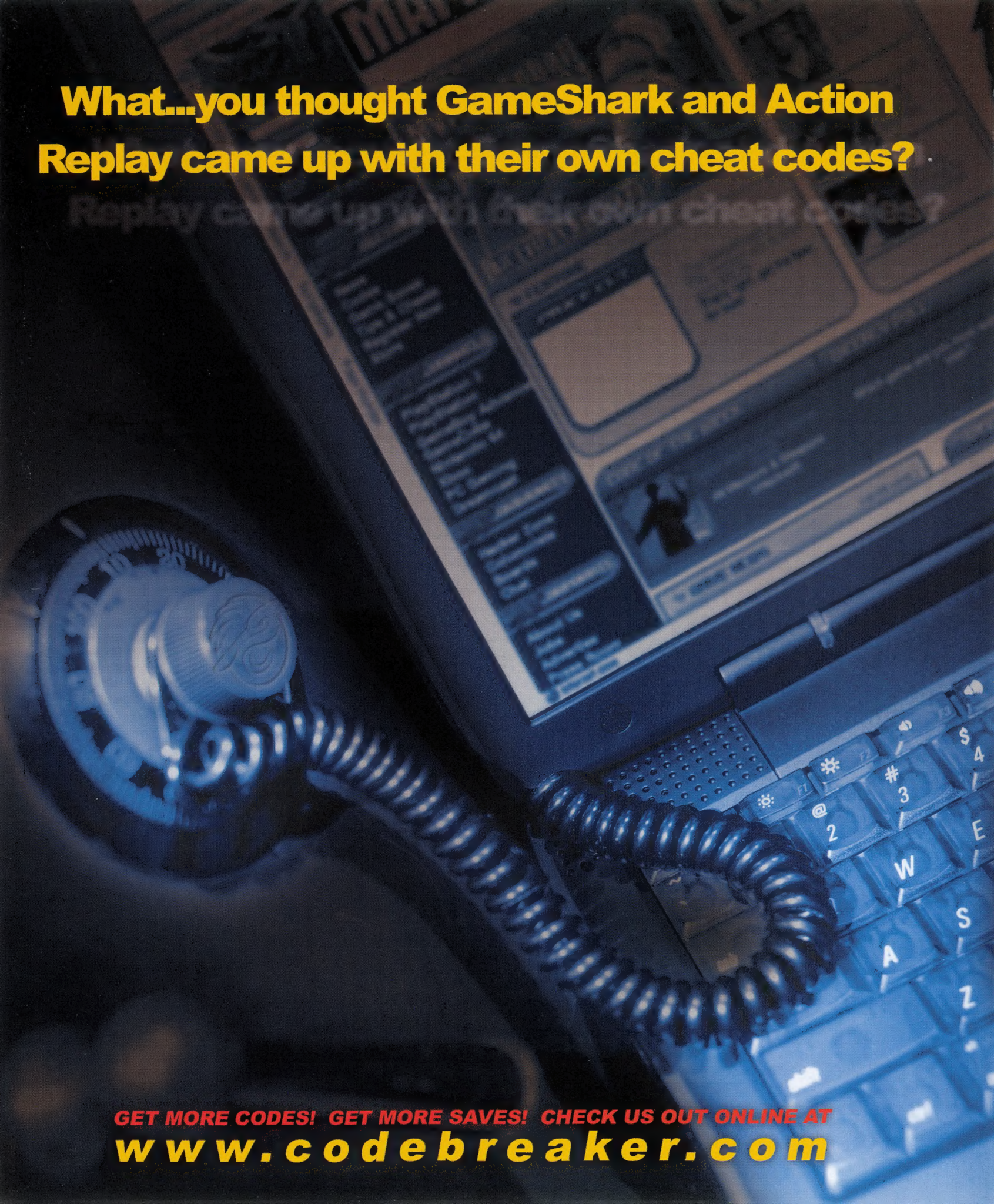
www.sotatoys.com

Scheduled for release this summer, these incredible 6" Street Fighter action figures from SOTA Toys may be the finest Capcom collectibles yet. Featuring a ridiculous amount of articulation and priced at $12.99, Ryu, Chun Li, Sodom, Sagat and M.Bison comprise the first wave, and a second series is already in the works. Watch for an extensive behind-the-scenes look at the creation of these impressive toys in an upcoming issue of Play.

Halo series 3

www.joyridestudios.com

Joyride's third wave of Halo action figures is out now, and once again, they've done a swell job shrinking the games characters down to scale, including Blue Master Chief, Sgt. Johnson, the Coveneant Banshee and the USNC Marines.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JEAN RENO AND TAKESHI KANESHIRO

TWO HEROES, ONE DESTINY

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MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore
Intense Violence

PlayStation 2

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